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January 1st

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THE GORILLA OF NO. 4

By J. D. NEWSOM

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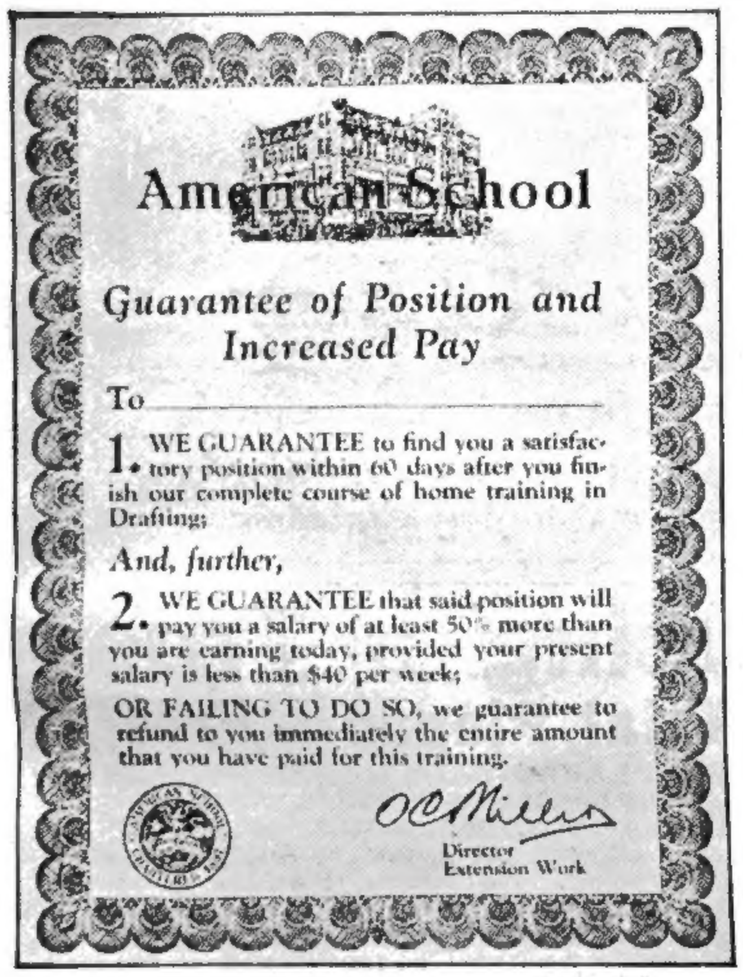
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There is no greater tragedy in the world than that of a man who stays in the rut all his life, when with just a little effort he could bring large success within his grasp.

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ADVENTURE
Jan. 1st, 1928

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Volume 65
Number 2

Scientific Mind Training

Will you accept this book with our compliments—a book that some of the most eminent people in the world advise you to read—a book that has already shown over 650,000 people how to develop, by means of simple exercises, great mental powers which lay dormant or weak within them.

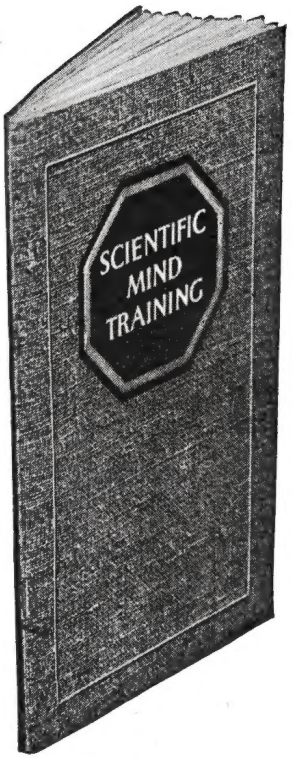
HERE is a book the value of which cannot be measured in terms of money. The simple ideas which it outlines have been endorsed enthusiastically by many of the most notable individuals in the world. It is a book which has changed the current of life—toward definite success and greater accomplishment—of over 650,000 individuals in every corner of the civilized world!

Why Most Men Fail in Life

Psychologists have long known that our mental faculties—the senses, observation, attention, memory, imagination, concentration, reasoning, willpower, and others—are susceptible to training, *just like any muscle in the body.* The degree to which they are *developed* in us is determined, in fact, by the extent to which we *use* these faculties.

If we *don't* use them; if we don't develop in any of these mental directions—these precious faculties, upon which our whole career depends, become (like unused muscles) weak, flabby, powerless, and ineffectual.

The average man doesn't see or hear a fraction of what goes on around him; his senses are completely dulled, *by lack of use;* he doesn't know how to reason properly, because he has never developed that faculty; his powers of attention are completely untrained. His memory is like a sieve. He is altogether lacking in any power of sustained concentration. When his mind is not a complete blank, it flits from one inchoate idea to another. Finally, he has no Will-Power at all, for seldom in his life has he *used* this god-given faculty. As a result, he is putty in the hands of clear-thinking people who *do* know what they want.



Here is a book which has influenced the lives—for the better—of hundreds of thousands of people.

The lives of such people can be metamorphosed, *by scientific training of their mental faculties.* They think they are "failures"; they are usually despondent, discouraged, self-conscious. The trouble is simply that one or more important mental faculties are *completely undeveloped* in them.

When they strengthen themselves *where they are weak,* they quickly become, in their own words, "new people."

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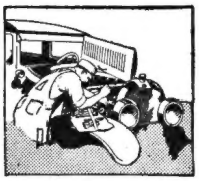

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Can You Guess This Man's Age?

See if You Can Tell Within 25 Years; The Author Couldn't; But He Stuck With Hobart Bradstreet Until He Revealed His Method of Staying Young

I USED to pride myself on guessing people's ages. That was before I met Hobart Bradstreet, whose age I missed by a quarter-century. But before I tell you how old he really is, let me say this:

My meeting-up with Bradstreet I count the luckiest day of my life. For while we often hear how our minds and bodies are about 50% efficient—and at times feel it to be the truth—he knows *why*. Furthermore, he knows how to overcome it—in five minutes—and he showed me *how*.

This man offers no such bromides as setting-up exercises, deep-breathing, or any of those things you know at the outset you'll never do. He uses a principle that is the foundation of all chiropractic, napropathy, mechano-therapy, and even osteopathy. Only he does not touch a hand to you; it isn't necessary.

The reader will grant Bradstreet's method of staying young worth knowing and using, when told the secret.

And here is the secret: *he keeps his spine in trim.*

Any man or woman who thinks spine motion doesn't make a difference should try it! It is easy enough. I'll tell you how. First, though, you may be curious to learn why a healthy spine puts one in an entirely new class physically. The spinal column is a series of tiny bones, between which are pads or cushions of cartilage. Nothing in the ordinary activities of us humans stretches the spine. So it "settles" day by day, until those once soft and resilient pads become thin as a safety-razor blade—and just about as hard. One's spine (the most wonderfully designed shock-absorber known) is then an unyielding column that transmits every shock straight to the base of the brain.

Do you wonder folks have backaches and headaches? That one's nerves pound toward the end of a hard day? Or that a nervous system may periodically go to pieces? For every nerve in one's body connects with the spine, which is a sort of central switchboard. When the "insulation," or cartilage, wears-down and flattens-out, the nerves are exposed, or even impinged —and there is trouble on the line.

Now, for proof that sublaxation of the spine causes most of the ills and ailments which spell "age" in men or women. Flex your spine—"shake it out"—and they will disappear. You'll feel the difference in *ten minutes*. At least I did. It's no trick to secure complete spinal laxation as Bradstreet does it. But like everything else, one must know how. No amount of violent exercise will do it; not even chopping wood. As for walking, or golfing, your spine settles down a bit firmer with each step.

Mr. Bradstreet has evolved from his 25-year experience with spinal mechanics a simple, boiled-down formula of just five movements. Neither takes more than one minute, so it means but five minutes a day. But those movements! I never experienced such compound exhilaration before. I was a good subject for the test, for I went into it with a dull headache. At the end of the second movement I thought I could actually feel my blood circulating. The third movement in this remarkable SPINE-MOTION series brought an amazing feeling of exhilaration. One motion seemed to open and shut my backbone like a jack-knife.

I asked about constipation. He gave me another motion—a peculiar, writhing and twisting movement—and fifteen minutes later came a complete evacuation!

Hobart Bradstreet frankly gives the full credit for his conspicuous success to these simple secrets of SPINE-MOTION. He has traveled about for years, conditioning those whose means permitted a specialist at their beck and call. I met him at the Roycroft Inn, at East Aurora. But Bradstreet, young as he looks and feels, thinks he has chased around the country long enough. He has been prevailed upon to put his

HOBART BRADSTREET, THE MAN WHO DEFIES AGE

SPINE-MOTION method in form that makes it now generally available.

I know what these remarkable mechanics of the spine have done for me. I have checked up at least twenty-five other cases. With all sincerity I believe nothing in the whole realm of medicine or specialism can quicker re-make, rejuvenate and restore one. I wish you could see Bradstreet himself. He is arrogantly healthy; he doesn't seem to have any nerves. Yet he puffs incessantly at a black cigar that would floor some men, drinks two cups of coffee at every meal, and I don't believe he averages seven hours' sleep. It shows what a sound nerve-mechanism will do. He says a man's power can and should be unabated up to the age of 60, in every sense, and I have had some astonishing testimony on that score.

Would you like to try this remarkable method of "coming back?" Or, if young, and apparently normal in your action and feelings, do you want to see your energies just about doubled? It is easy. No "apparatus" is required. Just Bradstreet's few, simple instructions, made doubly clear by his photographic poses of the five positions. Results come amazingly quick. In less than a week you should have new health, new appetite, new desire, and new capacities; you'll feel years lifted off mind and body. This man's method can be tested without risk. If you feel enormously benefited, everything is yours to keep and you have paid for it all the enormous sum of $3.00! Knowing something of the fees this man has been accustomed to receiving, I hope his naming $3.00 to the general public will have full appreciation.

The $3.00 which pays for everything is not sent in advance nor do you make any payment or deposit on delivery. Requests will be answered in turn. Try how it feels to have a full-length spine, and you'll henceforth pity men and women whose nerves are in a vise!

HOBART BRADSTREET, Inc., Suite 5518,
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I will try your SPINE-MOTION without risk if you will provide necessary instructions. Send everything post paid, without any charge or obligation, and I will try it five days. If I find SPINE-MOTION highly beneficial I can remit just $3 in full payment; otherwise I will return the material and will owe you nothing.

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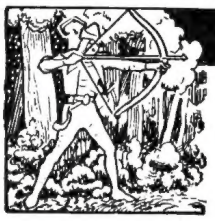

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When I first started making real important money I used to go down to the bank, draw out a roll—and just thumb it over in my office and grin! That's how good it felt to get success and big money, after years at a low-paid job.

Success and Big Money Were For Others, Not Me

Believe It or Not, That Was What I Thought of Myself—Just Twelve Short Months Ago

I'M TELLING YOU, just one year ago I'd never seen a hundred dollar bill in my life outside of a bank.

You'd think I'm kidding you if you saw the fine Radio business I own now. But it's gospel truth. Just twelve months ago I was only a poorly paid clerk, and I thought success had passed me by.

All my crowd in those days—the fellows I met in the pool-hall and at the bowling-alleys—said a fellow had to *have* money to make money. They claimed there was no chance for a fellow whose family didn't have money or some business to start him out in. And I'd decided they must be right.

I guess at that time I had just about given up hope. I thought there must be some kind of a mystery about making a lot of money. But I was due for a big awakening. Did I get it? Oh, boy! Read my story and judge for yourself.

IT ALL started one day last summer, when Helen, the girl I wanted to marry, was leaving for the seashore. Of course I went to the staton to see her off.

As I stepped onto the station platform Bob Oakes and Wilmer Pratt had just rolled up in their cars. They climbed out with their arms full of bundles—books, expensive candy, flowers, all sorts of things. Well sir, I wished I could have swallowed in one gulp the little box of drugstore candy I had bought for Helen—it certainly looked pitiful beside all that stuff.

We three stood there talking to Helen until train-time, while Helen's mother looked me up and down. Like any young girl's mother would, she had my financial standing already sized up within thirty-five cents. Cheap suit, cheap hat, she took it all in. And you could see on her face all the time what a lot of nerve she thought I had to give Bob and Wilmer a run for Helen.

Well, to make a long story short, Helen was nice, but her mother stood there looking scornful whenever she glanced my way, and she hardly spoke to me at all. I felt about as welcome as the measles, and as uncomfortable as the itch. I began to wish that I and my cheap suit and cheap hat could sink through the floor, but I stayed there and stuck it out.

WHEN Helen's train finally left, I slunk home, ashamed and humiliated. I went upstairs to my room and sat there with a lump in my throat, getting hotter and hotter and more ashamed of myself. Then I began to see red and redder.

Finally I jumped up and banged the table. "I'll show 'em," I growled through clenched teeth. "There *must* be some way for a man to make *real money!*" An idea suddenly flashed through my head.

Hastily I began thumbing the pages of a magazine on the table, searching for an advertisement that I'd seen many times, but passed up without thinking, an advertisement telling of big opportunities for trained men to succeed in the great new Radio field. With the advertisement was a coupon offering a big free book full of information. I sent the coupon in, and in a few days received a handsome book, telling about opportunities in the Radio field and how a man can prepare quickly and easily at home to take advantage of these opportunities. I read the book carefully and when I finished it I made my decision.

WHAT'S happened in the twelve months since that day, as I've already told you, seems almost like a dream to me now. For ten of those twelve months I've had a Radio business of my own! At first, of course, I started it as a little proposition on the side, under the guidance of the National Radio Institute, the outfit that gave me my Radio training. It wasn't long before I was getting so much to do in the Radio line that I quit my measly little clerical job, and devoted my full time to my Radio business.

Since that time I've gone right on up, always under the watchful guidance of my friends at the National Radio Institute. They would have given me just as much help, too, if I had wanted to follow some other line of Radio besides building my own retail business—such as broadcasting, manufacturing, experimenting, sea operating, or any of the score of lines they prepare you for. And to think that until that day I sent for their eye-opening book, I'd been wailing "I never had a chance!"

NOW I'm making real money, own a good car, stand high in my town, can borrow money at the bank any time I might want it. I'm getting some real *fun* and *enjoyment* out of life, not just *existing* from pay-day to pay-day.

And—just listen to this! Bob was in my place only the other day, and asked me for a job! Wilmer is still getting along pretty well on his father's money, but he'd trade places with me any day.

And Helen? Well—the honeymoon will be spent in Honolulu, starting two months from tomorrow!

HERE'S a real tip. Think it over—are you satisfied? Are you making enough money, at work that you like?

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Take another tip—No matter what your plans are, no matter how much or how little you know about Radio—clip the coupon below and look their free book over. The information it will give you is worth a few minutes of anybody's time. You will place yourself under no obligation—the book is free, and is gladly sent to anyone who wants to know about Radio. Just address: J. E. Smith, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 1-A, Washington, D. C.

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A Novelette of Haiti

by

Howard R. Marsh

No Sunday-school was The Duke's Palace, down toward the water front of Port-au-Prince; no fit place for an American, even a rowdy American like Circus Sam Digrout.

He had been quite drunk when he plunged into that low-ceilinged den, and all during that long rainy afternoon he had become drunker, until . . . .

But the rest of the story of this man and Duke's Palace, and voodoo-ridden Port-au-Prince is in the January EVERYBODY'S.

And, of course, there are a great many other engrossing stories, too.

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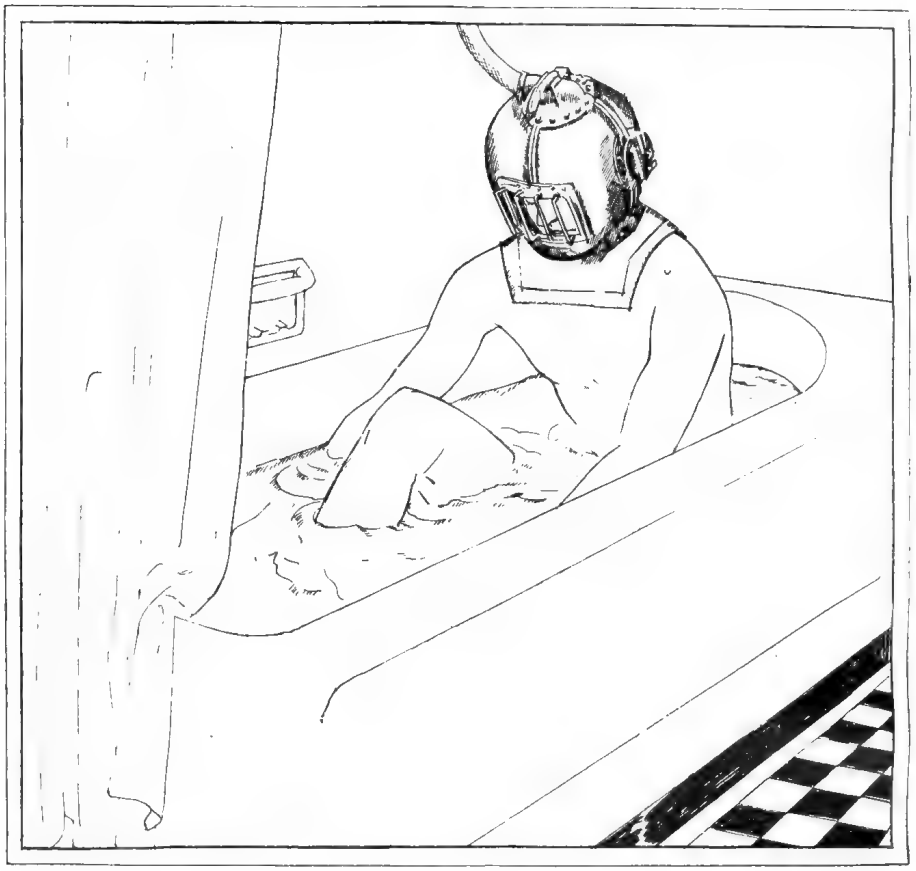

To daily divers

The desperate gentleman wearing the submarine millinery has climbed into his bath determined to go down among the molluscs and the octopi, if need be, on the trail of his cake of sinker soap.

If you have been compelled to plow along the tub-bottom in search of a cake of soap like that—

And if you do not own one of these fashionable deep-water derbies—

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Perhaps it has already occurred to you that the function of a soap in the bath is to get you clean—comfortably, luxuriously, quickly and triumphantly—and not to be the object of a feverish search every time it slips out of your hand. Well, then, you will welcome a floating cake of Ivory as a shipwrecked man welcomes the approach of a fifty-foot yacht with dinner on the table.

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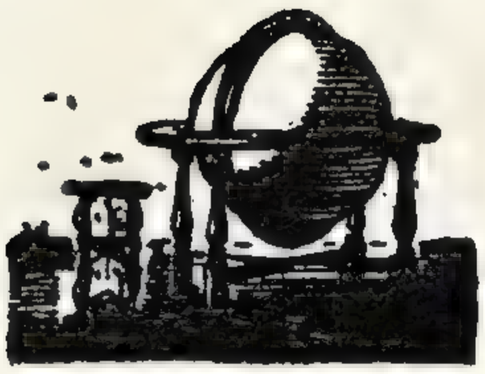

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Anthony M. Rud
EDITOR

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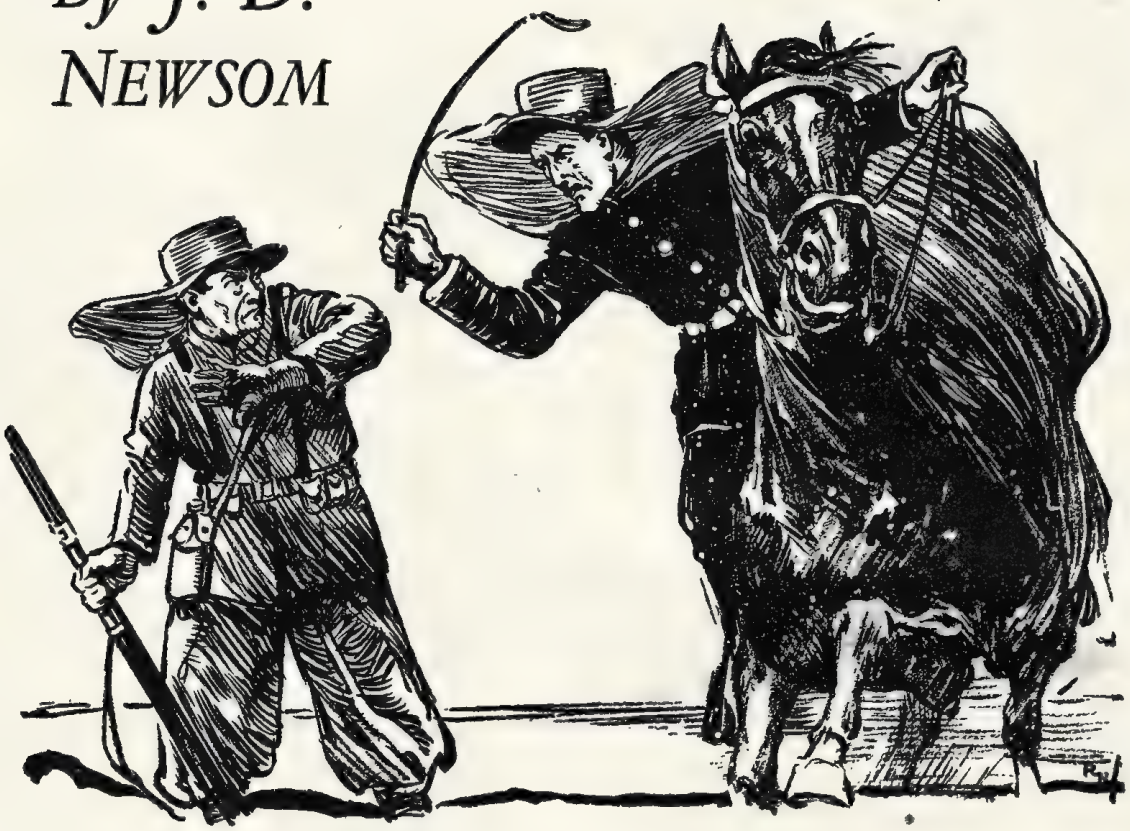
By J. D. NEWSOM



The GORILLA *of* No. 4

THE MOONLIGHT gleamed on the couples dancing on the terrace of the officers' mess at el Kelima to the slightly piercing strains of the "Valse d'Amour," played by the band of the Moroccan Tirailleurs.

Against the balustrade leaned Colonel Jean St. Simon de Liancourt, swinging a monocle at the end of its thin black ribbon. He was a stout, small boned little man of about fifty-five, dressed in a snow white uniform trimmed with gold. Many medals glinted on his left breast. His thin, sharp featured face expressed the most complete self-satisfaction and self-confidence. He had limpid blue eyes, an aquiline nose and a small, tight lipped mouth.

"Yes," he was saying to a slim, fair lady, "undoubtedly. This is a great moment! When I think that two years ago—two years ago tomorrow—I set eyes on el Kelima for the first time! On the very spot where we are now standing, dear lady, the blood of my brave men ran in streams!" He gave his monocle a little flip and sighed reminiscently. "The Ouled-Farik made their last stand on this hillock. We carried it at the bayonet point . . . Yes, and to think that today we inaugurated the el Kelima race track!"

"Progress!" smiled the lady, looking up at him between long black lashes. "How wonderful it is—all this! Such a beautiful place! I never dreamed there was

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE OF THE FOREIGN LEGION IN MOROCCO

anything like this in southern Morocco! I thought it was all desert and rebels, you know. At least that's what everybody says at Rabat."

"Oh, we have civilized the territory," laughed the colonel. "Pacified it completely. There were rebels aplenty, I assure you. It took me almost twelve months to make these people understand that we were here to stay. I flatter myself they have learned their lesson. I stood no nonsense of any kind." Here he put the monocle in his right eye and looked stern. "It pays," he added. "No doubt about it. And then, of course, as soon as I had the tribes well in hand I went to work—rebuilding."

"They say such nice things about you at Rabat," cooed Mme. Perigoud.

The colonel bowed gallantly. He felt that they could never say as many nice things about him at Rabat as he really deserved, which was one of the reasons why he had taken Mme. Perigoud aside for a little *tête-à-tête*. Not only was she very charming, but she was also the wife of a most influential man on the political side, and the colonel felt that he was ripe for a really important post—a governorship or something equally fulsome.

"The moonlight—" began Mme. Perigoud, stifling a small yawn.

"Oh, yes! The moonlight! The desert moonlight." The colonel tried to register deep emotion. "Two years ago it looked down upon a scene of barbarous savagery. Today that glistening orb sees the far flung vanguard of a great civilization going about its business in peace and safety!"

Mme. Perigoud glanced anxiously over her shoulder. The colonel was, admittedly, a great colonist, but he could also be a great bore. Like many another pretty woman, she wasn't interested in Peace and Progress; she was interested in herself. Still, the colonel had his good points. He had brought together at el Kelima some of the most entertaining young officers. Not one of them was an outsider: most of them had money; all of them were charming. They flirted so tactfully. They were so decorative.

It was really quite an adventure to leave the civilized north and come down to el Kelima on the fringe of the desert. The place was so completely cut off from the outside world. It stood at the southern end of the Bou Hadide Pass through the Djedir Range, and less than a year earlier the territory had been in a state of insurrection and war.

But Colonel de Liancourt had changed all that. He had pacified the wild Ouled-Farik Farik with Lebel bullets, machine guns and mountain batteries.

He was in the act of explaining how much of his success was due to the simple faith his soldiers had in him, when Mme. Perigoud thoughtlessly interrupted him.

"Here comes Captain Lafeuillade," she cried. "He didn't forget my ice after all!"

The captain was still twenty feet or so away, maneuvering past the throng of dancers on the terrace, and de Liancourt decided he had time for just a few more weighty words.

"To consolidate our work and bring to the subject races the inestimable benefits of our peace—"

Crash!

In rapid succession a dozen rifle shots rang out. Bullets whined through the night. There was a tinkle of falling glass. Captain Lafeuillade carried his hands to his throat, stood for a moment looking with astonished eyes at the spellbound dancers and pitched forward, falling face foremost at Mme. Perigoud's feet.

Then a hundred things happened all at once. The vicious spat and crackle of the rifles mingled with shrill cries of terror from the ladies; somebody shouted in a frantic voice for the lights in the mess to be put out; some one else fainted noisily; there was a general rush away from the terrace toward the wide open doors of the mess. The voice of a sergeant lost somewhere in the dark shadows at the foot of the terrace made itself heard. It was saying highly impolite things to an invisible group of soldiers who could be heard running heavily along a graveled path.

A bullet chipped the stone balustrade of the terrace, within inches of Colonel de Liancourt's hand, and bumbled away like an angry bee. A bugle brayed. More soldiers were running about in the darkness. For a second the explosive crackle of musketry swelled up to a roar, then it decreased, receding into the distance until it died away with a sputter.

Colonel de Liancourt's face was dark red with wrath. Veins stood out in cords on his temples, and his rather too prominent eyes were glassy as he stepped into the reception room where his guests were huddled like sheep.

"This outrage—" he began. "This contemptible outrage—"

Then he stopped. Words failed him. He choked back his indignation and tried again.

"This is the work of some fanatic," he declared, clenching his fists. "A causeless, stupid aggression. I beg you, my friends, do not alarm yourselves. We shall apprehend the murderer and deal with him swiftly. Full reparation shall be made."

"I was under the impression el Kelima was free from such border raids," remarked a M. Delacroix, a resident administrator from Mogador, who had come down with his wife to help inaugurate the racetrack. "Had one known—" he raised his eyebrows—"had one even surmised that the lives of those most dear to us would be exposed to grave dangers—"

"There is no danger," the colonel retorted tartly. "None! An isolated incident. It can not reoccur. In my own name and in the name of all my officers, I can but apologize, and assure you that implacable justice will be meted out to the scoundrel!"

His words were greeted by a murmur of approval. Very frightened ladies began to recover their composure now that the firing had died away. If it had not been for Captain Lafeuillade's murder they would have recovered even more completely.

"It is late," de Liancourt went on. "I don't think any of us will feel like dancing any more after this shocking incident. I am going to ask you to retire and I must go to my office and start an investigation at once."

People began to straggle away.

"We—ah—trust you implicitly," a solemn gentleman with a black spade beard assured him as they shook hands. "Poor Captain Lafeuillade!"

"Alas!" murmured the colonel. "A splendid officer! My Legionnaires have been robbed of their chief! But they will avenge him, they will fight like lions! He died a soldier's death."

"I hope there will be no need for your Legionnaires to exhibit their lion-like qualities whilst my wife is present," said the solemn gentleman.

And he went off to bed, keeping a tight hold on his wife's elbow.

What the colonel said was unintelligible, but it sounded very much like the language used by the sergeant in the shadow of the terrace. Which was impossible, for the colonel was a gentleman.

IT WAS only when he reached his office that the colonel began to realize that he might be faced by something more troublesome than a stray fanatic in search of cheap glory.

A party of unarmed Spahis, strolling back to the redoubt after spending the evening in the Arab town of el Kelima, had been ambushed as they crossed the road close to the marabout of Sidi Yar el Yacub, and massacred—fourteen of them.

An armed picket of Foreign Legionnaires which had gone to investigate the cause of the fusillade had been ambushed too, less than five hundred yards from the redoubt, and nine of them had been dropped. Then the marauders had vanished. It was pitch black beneath the trees, and the picket had been unable to find any trace of its assailants, but the sergeant in charge swore he had heard several horses galloping away up the road leading into the Bou Hadîde Pass.

He was a gray haired veteran, with a hard, leathery face, that sergeant; a blunt spoken, matter of fact man. His account of the affair was as unemotional as a railroad timetable—which annoyed the colonel excessively.

He had had quite a shock, his guests had been thrown into a panic, but this grizzly sergeant acted as if murder were an every day occurrence at el Kelima! He screwed his monocle into his eye, stared at the sergeant for some moments and barked:

"What do you mean by saying you heard the sound of galloping horses? Where were you at the time?"

"On the road, *mon Colonel*," said the sergeant.

"Why didn't you follow up these murderers?"

"The shots came from our right. I faced my squad about and returned the fire. No more shots came from that direction, *mon Colonel*. Two minutes later the sound of horses' hoofs reached us."

"On a moonlight night!" sneered de Liancourt. "Yes, I understand all too well. A few shots are fired over your heads, and that's the end of it—the murderers can walk away unmolested! Disgusting conduct. Disgusting!"

"Four of my men were killed and five wounded at the first discharge," the sergeant pointed out. "And by moonlight, *mon Colonel*, the visibility is bad."

"You mean you lost a few men and the others broke in disorder. Disgraceful conduct, I say!"

"My squad—" began the sergeant in a voice that rang like iron, "my squad—"

"Shut up and get out!" rasped de Liancourt. "I haven't asked you for an opinion. Get out!"

The sergeant saluted smartly, turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

De Liancourt felt better. He hadn't found the murderer yet, but at least he had vented his spleen on somebody. He didn't like Legionnaires—foreigners—couldn't even speak decent French. He turned to his staff captain, Erneste Monvallon, a quietly superior person with impeccable manners.

"Whom have we got to put in charge of those Legionnaires?" he inquired irritably. "Whom? Lafeuillade, poor fellow, killed like this, so suddenly—hm-m." He sponged his forehead with a pongee handkerchief. "Nonentity though—nonetity—tongue tied. Oh, well, we mustn't criticize a dead comrade—but, *sapristi*, these Legionnaires must be in bad shape. Ran away, that's what it amounts to, because of a few odd shots. They need smartening up. Whom can we spare until they send us another officer?"

"For purposes of smartening up," drawled Monvallon, "I would suggest our friend Kergonec. Young—" he paused and dusted a speck off his coat sleeve—"but willing."

"Exactly," agreed de Liancourt. "The very man I had in my—on the tip of my tongue. Make a note of it for tomorrow's garrison orders; Kergonec in temporary command of the fourth company of the Legionnaires. Now what about this other business, this despicable aggression?"

Monvallon, for all his superior calm, was an efficient staff captain. He had a

knack for getting things done. Already the oasis had been searched and the Arab town had been surrounded in case the marauders might have taken refuge there.

"And," he concluded sleepily, "I have asked the *kaid* to report here at once, on the off chance that he might know something about the affair. Indeed, I have sent a detachment of Spahis to fetch the old fellow, trusting, of course, that such a move would receive your approval."

"Quite right, quite right. Yes, of course. Had that thought in mind while I was dealing with that stupid fool of a sergeant. *Mon Dieu*, to think that such a thing should happen while el Kelima is crowded with outsiders!"

HE WENT on grumbling until the *kaid* Yüsef ibn Muhammed was announced. The *kaid* was a paunchy Arab with a liberal dash of negro blood in his veins, which had thickened his lips and crinkled his scanty gray beard. He loved the French, genuinely loved them. Since they had established themselves at el Kelima he had grown rich dealing in dates and supplying the troops with more or less fresh vegetables and the most dubious kind of goats' meat. Moreover, these same troops protected him against his hereditary enemies, the hillsmen, and he prayed to the One True God to make quite sure his white allies never, never deserted him. But that night he was crazy with fear.

He fawned upon the colonel.

"*Sidi!*" he grabbed. "O *Sidi*, the calamity! the calamity! I foresaw it all. Oh, my beard is in your hands—beware!"

There was a great deal more in the same vein.

"But what is the matter with him?" protested de Liancourt. "Must I sit here until dawn listening to this maniac? The stupid old fool!"

"I gather that he—ah—thinks he knows something," Monvallon said placidly.

"My very thought," agreed the colonel, "quite so! He knows something. Probably implicated in the murder. The scoundrel!" He turned toward the *kaid* and barked:

"Enough of that! Excuses won't save you, my man. If you're guilty—you die. Nothing can save you. You hear that? Nothing!" He took out his monocle and popped his eyes wide open at the *kaid*. "Now then, in as few words as possible, what happened?"

"But—O *Sidi*, I strive to tell you, I am your slave—and guiltless!" He was gray with fear, and his podgy finger clawed at the edge of the table. "It is that dog of a hillsman Ahmed ben Zeroual who did the shooting."

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed de Liancourt, "now we are getting somewhere! You formally accuse Ahmed ben Zeroual, do you?"

"None other! *Sidi*, I warn you—"

"The name is familiar. I've heard it before, I'm sure I've heard it before. Monvallon, I've heard that name before, haven't I?"

"He's the Arab you sent to prison last Monday," explained the staff captain. "Forty-eight hours' detention for refusing to move on after he had camped on the racetrack."

"Well, what about him? Silly, blathering old fool! Remember him perfectly. Silly old imbecile. Religious fanatic. Stank like a goat. Filthy beast!"

"But in the hills, *Sidi*," broke in the *kaid*, "he is looked upon as a *walli*, a holy man, a saint!"

"*Mon Dieu*, what a saint! He stank like a goat!" de Liancourt burst out laughing. "I don't admire their taste in saints. Still, that's irrelevant. Why do you accuse him of having instigated the murder of ten of my men? Speak up now, speak up!"

By degrees they pieced the story together.

Ahmed ibn Zeroual, a flea bitten Arab, had had the insolence to pitch his tents on the racecourse the day before the inauguration. He had been told to pack up and clear out, but he refused to do so although he had the whole wide desert in which to park his goats and his camels. So, of course, he was locked up

for forty-eight hours to teach him better manners.

He was an unimportant sheik, the head of a small clan of twenty men with their women folk and children living in picturesque squalor in half size tents. "Information" had him listed as a minor prophet of doom with a knack for going into cataleptic trances at religious festivals. Otherwise he was supposed to be quite harmless. That, at least, was the official opinion.

The *kaid* of el Kelima was of a different mind. According to him Ahmed ben Zeroual exercised a tremendous influence over the Ouled-Farik, who peopled the Djedir hills. At a word from him they would arise as one man and fight like fiends. There were at least five thousand rifles in the hills ready and waiting for the signal.

"Absurd!" broke in the colonel. "You rave like a madman. Listen to me, Yüsef ibn Muhammed." He squared his shoulders and looked portentous. "*I* taught the Ouled-Farik a lesson they will never forget. I tamed them, I flatter myself, once and for all. And as for hidden rifles—I don't believe there are a dozen all told from one end of the hills to the other. *I* stopped the gun running. We have stopped it, haven't we, Monvallon?"

"Almost completely," agreed Monvallon. "An odd one may be smuggled in now and again."

"Isn't that what I'm saying—an odd one here and there? And how," he went on, glaring at the *kaid*, "have you come into possession of such alarming rumors? It won't do to spread them, you know. It won't do at all. I won't have it!"

THE *KAID* had a great deal more to say. It amounted in substance to this: Ahmed ben Zeroual was a dog; all the Ouled-Farik were dogs. There was going to be a rebellion because ben Zeroual had been jailed. As soon as he had been released he had gone into the hills to call his hyenas to war. The man of his clan had stayed behind long enough to ambush a few troopers, and had galloped off afterward up the Bou Hadîde Pass to join their leader.

The colonel fumed and fretted. If, by some remote chance, the *kaid* happened to be right, there were awkward days ahead. Because everything had been quiet for so long the garrison had been cut down to the bare minimum. Indeed, he had prided himself on his ability to control a vast area with so few men, thus proving that he was a true colonist. He had at his disposal a battalion of Moroccan Tirailleurs, a detachment of Spahis and a company of the Foreign Legion—say fifteen hundred men. More than enough under normal circumstances, but if a rebellion were going to flare up he would need twice as many troops.

The Ouled-Farik could block the road through the Bou Hadîde Pass; el Kelima was two hundred kilometers from the Ain Seffra base; and then there were all the guests of the mess to be considered. He began to wish his guests were in the bottom of the deep blue sea—until he remembered how ridiculous all these rumors were.

Probably Ahmed ben Zeroual was guilty, but that didn't mean the Ouled-Farik were going to rebel. And even if they wanted to they had no rifles. The whole thing was a tissue of lies.

"Enough!" he snapped. "Yüsef ibn Muhammed, enough of this drivel. France is here to protect you. France is not to be intimidated by the wild utterances of a mad hillsman. You hear what I say: You call yourself a loyal friend—show it! And if you are so loyal—" he leaned across the table and threatened the *kaid* with a rigid forefinger—"how is it that you are in possession of the alleged enemy's secrets? Answer me at once!"

The *kaid* was duly impressed. He quivered and wrung his hands.

"Oh *Sidi*," he gabbled, "Ahmed ben Zeroual, that dog, came in person to my house as soon as he was released and he told me of the things that were to befall, and he said he would burn my great and prosperous city, and he said he would

overturn the walls of the redoubt, and he said that he would feed your liver to the jackals—and before he went away he robbed me of five thousand francs and placed a hillsman to mount guard over me so that I could not warn you. And the hillsman stayed with a knife against my side until the shots rang out. Then he fled. What could I do?"

"You can go home to bed and keep quiet," snorted the colonel. "By tomorrow night we'll have this would-be rebel in prison again. He'll be tried and shot. All the guilty will be shot. And that will be the end of your rebellion. Go!"

"Be warned," begged the *kaid*, who was really beside himself with fear. "O, Excellence—*Sidi*—colonel—stamp upon those dogs, stamp hard."

"Go!" repeated the colonel.

And the *kaid* departed, retreating backward until he reached the door.

There followed a moment of silence. The colonel sat back in his chair and stared thoughtfully at a fly crawling across his desk. Monvallon stood nearby, stroking his chin with two well kept fingers.

"Rebellion—" murmured the colonel. Then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"I have been thinking," remarked Monvallon, "that perhaps it would be wise to keep our guests here until we have made sure that the pass is clear."

"That's only common sense," agreed the colonel, a slight frown taking the place of his complacent smile. "But you don't believe any of this rubbish, do you?"

"Of course not, *mon Colonel.* A rebellion after the masterly way in which you tamed these Ouled-Farik? Impossible! But there is this band of malcontents to be considered. They could make the journey most unpleasant, and there is always the risk of a stray shot—"

"Exactly what I wanted to tell you, *mon cher* Monvallon," broke in the colonel. "We'll send the Legion through the pass tomorrow morning and dispatch a company of Tirailleurs to hunt for this Ahmed ben Zeroual. I want him caught within the next forty-eight hours at the latest—at the very latest!"

LIEUTENANT KERGONEC came out on parade in the gray dawn light with a dubious taste in his mouth and a chip on both shoulders. He surveyed the men of the 4th Company of the Legion, drawn up for his inspection, with unconcealed hostility. He liked nothing about them. A gang of foreigners—dumb Russians, stupid Germans, stolid. Dutchmen—an unholy crew. Their lean, hard faces were like marble—stiff, tight-jawed and repellent. One hundred and thirty pairs of eyes bored into him, sizing him up. They stood there at attention, as motionless as carven images. They were too perfect to suit Kergonec; their uniforms of white canvas were spotless, their black cummerbunds appeared to have been put on by machinery. Not a finger was out of alignment; not a button was missing. When the adjutant brought them up to attention they worked as one man.

But they couldn't impress Kergonec. He was a cavalry officer, an officer of Spahis in the bargain, and he had the mounted man's innate contempt for the foot soldier, especially for rapscallion Legionnaires. He didn't want to lead them, he wanted no truck with them at all, but the colonel had detailed him for the job and there was just one thing for him to do—obey.

There was one small consolation, however. Captain Monvallon has told him that the Legionnaires required smartening up, and that he had been specially picked for the task pending the arrival of a regular Legion officer.

"The colonel's not pleased with them," Monvallon had said. "He thinks they're slack and he rather fancies you as a good disciplinarian."

"Well, I'll give them discipline!"

"Company," he ordered sharply. "*Arme a l'épaule—droite!* Right shoulder arms!"

They obeyed with crisp precision, with a snap and swing and a rattle. Steady!

It was a flawless bit of parade ground routine performed by veterans who were proud of their work—but it was not good enough for Kergonec. Not by a long shot. He intended to show those Legionnaires that they didn't know the first thing about musketry drill.

"As you were!" he barked, smacking his boot with his riding crop. "Smarter than that, you sheep! Right shoulder—hipe!"

Up they came, one hundred and thirty rifles with clockwork precision; and still Lieutenant Kergonec was not satisfied.

Six times he made them repeat the exercise, to a running fire of sarcastic jibes, meant to impress those sullen Legionnaires with his own importance. They weren't going to make a monkey out of him!

Now those Legionnaires, for the most part, had forgotten more about musketry drill than Kergonec had ever learned. They knew quite well just how efficient they were, and this arrogant little squirt of a "two-stringer" began to exasperate them. Moreover, they were wearing their full marching kit; their cartridge pouches were filled; and they knew they were headed not only for a dusty, hot march but for possible trouble. It was *no* time for rifle drill.

The adjutant, a gaunt, raw boned old-timer, saw the danger signs flying high and wide, but he very tactfully said nothing. The young Spahi officer, he decided, might as well learn his lesson at once.

And Lieutenant Kergonec gave that order once too often. The sixth time he ordered the men to slope arms they seemed to be stricken with acute palsy. It took fully a minute for those one hundred and thirty rifles to reach their proper resting places, and then they were canted at every impossible angle. Strange things occurred that marked an epoch in the company's history. Soldiers with ten years' service lost their balance and collided heavily against their neighbors. One man, a large, solemn, black bearded trooper, scored first prize. He managed to loop his rifle sling on his neighbor's arm, and for a minute they were both shouldering the same rifle.

At last, at long last, the clattering and the jostling died away. One hundred and thirty blank and expressionless faces were turned toward the lieutenant.

He had grown chalk white save for two bright red spots high up on his cheek bones. For a moment the muscles of his throat worked convulsively as he choked back the things he wanted to say.

"*Monsieur l'Adjutant!*" he said loudly.

The adjutant stepped forward two paces, cracked his heels together, saluted—and stood like a ramrod.

"The company is deprived of its wine ration for one week," Kergonec went on, "and until further orders it will do an hour's extra drill each day."

He was quite cool and calm. He knew positively just how calm he was—yet there was a quaver in his voice which he could not suppress.

"Very good, *mon Lieutenant*," snapped the adjutant. He had a wide mouth which closed like a rat-trap, with a snap.

What he thought of the lieutenant could have been expressed in one short, unlovely, unprintable word. Discipline was one thing—he was a hard disciplinarian himself—but he drew the line at such footling antics.

For one split second they stared full into each other's eyes, then Kergonec rasped:

"March them out, *Monsieur l'Adjutant!*"

AND HE turned away and hurried toward his horse. He wasn't through with these swine yet. The dubious taste lingering in his mouth due to too much cognac the night before did not help to improve his temper. He wondered what kind of an officer the late Captain Lafeuillade could have been to allow such rank insubordination to creep into his company. Spahis, thank God, were different! Finest cavalry on earth! But while he was about it he'd teach these Legionnaires a thing or two. No wonder

the colonel had asked him to take them in hand! He felt flattered the colonel had entrusted him with such a difficult task.

He did not feel so flattered a quarter of an hour later when the outfit began to sing as it plodded down the road through the Bou Hadîde Pass. Day had dawned, but there was still a false sense of coolness in the air and patches of shadow lingered at the base of the high bare hills. The song started somewhere toward the rear end of the column, a platoon took up the chorus and in a minute the whole company was braying at the top of its lungs.

At first Kergonec would not condescend to lend an ear to the song; it was just one of those clumsy marching tunes of the Legion, and he had other things to think about. Oh, most important things. He was out to hunt for rebels. Every so often he slipped the reins over his arm and scanned the boulder strewn slopes for some sign of a lurking foe. Nothing moved. A gaseous heat haze was forming along the crest of the hills; shafts of golden light plunged down into the valley, and an oven hot breeze flung a film of fine dust in his face.

Then all at once, glancing down at the line of marching men, he noticed a hatchet faced trooper with a cavernous hole of a mouth who seemed to be singing straight at him. The man's *képi* was cocked over one eye, the collar of his tunic was unhooked, he held his rifle upside down on his shoulder and he marched as only a Legionnaire marches—in long, mile devouring strides, humpbacked beneath his mountainous *barda.**

Something about the lilt of the tune made Kergonec prick up his ears. He listened more closely. Yes, he had heard them sing the same sort of thing before—a long rigmarole about imaginary officers and imaginary officers' wives. It was one of those appalling marching songs such as warriors may sing on the line of march, but which under no circumstances could be tolerated within earshot of a sensitive person, for it dealt with the raw facts of life in a super-Rabelaisian manner.

*Pack.

When Kergonec first started to listen they were winding up the immoral story of the captain, and after polishing off the chorus, they turned with increased gusto to the lieutenant's private life. Kergonec's ears began to burn. He tried to shut out the sound and busied himself with his binoculars, but the words dinned in his brain. And suddenly it dawned upon him that they were not dealing with the doings of some mythical character—but with him. They were picking him to pieces to the rhythm of pounding boots.

Left, right, left . . . An anonymous bard somewhere down the ranks improvised bawdy verses. The company repeated them and thundered the chorus. Corporals tried to look innocent; sergeants studied the landscape, hunting for rebels. The adjutant, eating dust at the tail end of the column, was scowling—and humming the chorus.

Kergonec stood it as long as he could—which was not long enough. He heard himself referred to as a bandy-legged Breton lout, an impoverished aristocrat, a social climber (only they called it something much more coarse), and a clown. Then they started to give him good advice! They urged his mamma to wipe the milk off his lips, and lamented the fact that he was a eunuch.

But that was as far as they got.

He reined in his horse so viciously that it reared up and almost went over backward.

"Silence!" he shouted. "Stop that singing!"

"Silence!" repeated the non-coms. "Stop that singing!"

And the song died away. It ended so abruptly that the silence itself was an insult which galled Kergonec almost beyond endurance.

"Can't you keep your men in hand?" he barked at the nearest platoon sergeant. "This isn't a military unit, it's a rabble. I'll have those stripes off your arm if I hear another sound!"

"Pardon me, *mon Lieutenant*," grunted the sergeant, hitching up his pack as he tramped along. "Pardon me, but *you*

gave the order to march at ease and singing on the line of march has never been forbidden yet."

"Well, I forbid it!" snapped Kergonec. "We're not out on a picnic—we're hunting rebels! If your men don't know how to act like soldiers they'll have to be shown! March at attention!"

"Number Three platoon," ordered the sergeant. "Eyes front! March at attention!"

The whole company followed suit.

Kergonec rode on again, very straight backed, his chin held high. He'd show them a thing or two!

AT THE end of the first hour, instead of calling the usual ten-minute halt, he went on without a break. At the end of the second hour—the same. It was hot as hell between the narrow walls of the defile; the incandescent rays of the sun beat down on the troopers' heads. Left, right, left! One hundred and thirty pairs of boots hammered the rock and the soft white sand. There was no singing now. He'd tame the *salopards!*

Their faces were crusted with dust where the sweat carved crooked gulleys. Dust beaded their eyelashes and powdered their beards. March!

The naked hills quivered in the heat; the sky was a bowl of molten brass. March!

He pressed his heels against his horse's flanks to quicken the pace a bit, but before the jaded brute could do more than whisk its tail, the adjutant appeared at Kergonec's side.

"Well, *Monsieur l'Adjutant?*" inquired Kergonec. "A pleasant day after all, is it not?"

"Pleasant," repeated the adjutant, snapping the word between his teeth as if he wanted to bite it. "You may call it that if you like, *mon Lieutenant.* I call it by a different name. Six men have dropped out already. You're going to lose half the company if you don't call a halt pretty soon."

"*Eh bien, par exemple!*" cried Kergonec. "Are you trying to give me orders? What's come over you? Are you insane?"

The adjutant's eyes blazed out of the mask of dust.

"Maybe I am," he retorted. "Maybe I am—but by God, I'll not stand by quietly while the best company in the territory is wrecked just because you don't know how to handle it! I've been in the Legion twenty-five years; I'm due for a pension in three months, but I'll face a court martial rather than see my men ruined. And that's what you're doing—ruining them! They're Legionnaires, these men—not a bunch of conscripts!"

"Personally," drawled Kergonec, giving an imitation of the very superior man, "personally, I prefer conscripts. Go back to your place, *Monsieur l'Adjutant,* and stay there."

His voice cut like a whip lash, but its effect on the adjutant was nil.

"You've lost six men," he pointed out. "Good men, they marched till the sun got them and they dropped. Look at the others—d'you think they're fit to go into action if we meet any of those rebels? *Sacré nom de Dieu!*" he burst out. "I've helped to make this company what it is, and you're not going to smash it to pieces. Either you give the order to halt or I do!"

"You're out of your mind," smiled Kergonec. "If I hear one more word out of you I'm going to place you under arrest. Rebels! I suppose you *are* afraid of a handful of marauders. Rebels, indeed! There isn't a rebel in the whole range! Now get back where you belong, and at once!"

Still the adjutant held his ground.

"*Mon Lieutenant,*" he said quietly, "I repeat what I said— You don't understand Legionnaires. I'm trying to avoid an accident. I don't want my company disgraced. They're hard men—stubborn. You can drive them just so far—and you've driven them too far. So I'll take all the blame. I'm old—I don't care. Either you halt now of your own accord or I'll call the halt. Suit yourself, *mon Lieutenant.*"

It may have been the heat, or the sense of impending disaster which exasperated Kergonec beyond all bounds. Whatever the cause, all at once he lost control of himself.

He raised his riding crop, in full view of the marching men, and slashed it across the adjutant's face. Almost before the blood spurted beneath the blow, he was appalled at the thing he had done, but it was too late to repair the damage. Fifty men had witnessed the incident . . . His whole career, for which he had worked so hard, of which he was so sure, was at stake. Unless he could find some loophole of escape he was bound to have to face a court martial.

"Get back where you belong," he ordered in a choked voice. "Obey at once!"

The adjutant raised his hand to the gash on his cheek, wiped away a few drops of blood—and stared at his reddened finger tips with a look on his face which made Kergonec's blood run cold.

And the Legionnaires slogged by—left, right, left—staring out of the corner of their eyes at the two rigid figures standing by the side of the trail.

After a moment's silence the adjutant looked up—

"You refuse to give that order?" he inquired.

"Yes," rasped Kergonec, smacking his gloved hand on his knee. "Yes! And what is more—you are under arrest for refu—"

Crack! Away up ahead a spurt of blue smoke eddied above the boulders midway up the hillside.

The Legionnaire on point duty sprawled in the middle of the track with a bullet in his neck.

Rebels!

With a start Kergonec dug his spurs into his horse's steaming flanks and galloped up to the head of the column. He was in luck! He was going to round up the murderers instead of leaving it to the Moroccan Tirailleurs!

The squad at cover-point had come to a halt in the middle of the road. Strained white faces peered up at the shimmering hillside. A hundred yards in rear the bulk of the company stood waiting for orders.

Crack! A second shot punctured the stillness and the bullet whined past Kergonec's head. A thrill of pride ran through him. They had spotted him and were trying to bring him down. He sat bolt upright in his saddle.

He should have ordered the company to take open order and lie low among the rocks until he had located the enemy. But in the excitement of the moment he forgot all about such elementary precautions and started to make a speech.

"*Mes amis!*" he cried. "Up there are the Arabs who murdered your captain. It is your duty to—"

Then a whole string of shouts rang out. More followed in quick succession and all at once, with a deepening roar, the hillside awoke and a storm of lead beat down upon the Legionnaires. They were ambushed, front, flank and rear, not by a band of twenty outlaws but by five hundred hillsmen or more armed with very modern repeating rifles.

KERGONEC'S horse was shot beneath him. He jumped off as the brute pitched over and ran back to join his command. The Legionnaires had not waited for him to give any orders. Sergeants had rushed their men under cover of the loose rocks on either side of the trail and were blazing away at the gray *djellabas* on the hillside.

But there was little or no shelter against the plunging bullets. There were a score of dead men huddled in the roadway. Kergonec saw first one trooper, then another, shot down. He was spattered with the blood of a third whose skull was burst open like an egg. The others were firing and loading and firing again with swift, mechanical gestures. A sergeant, standing behind his men, was pointing out targets as dispassionately as if he had been on a rifle range. All at once, he clapped his hands to his stomach, sank slowly to his knees and fell over sidewise.

The air hissed about Kerognec's ears.

His sun helmet was snatched off his head. Something stung his shoulder. Wounded! He could feel the blood dribble down inside his shirt. A scratch—

Above the roar of the musketry, he heard the full throated shout of the Ouled-Farik. A dense mass of them were pouring down the pass, driving straight at the Legionnaires.

They were trapped—they were going to die in that inferno of sound and white light and heat! Kergonec squared his shoulders and prepared to die like an officer and a gentleman, sword in hand. He could hear the long drawn cry of the hillsmen . . .

And at that moment the adjutant appeared out of nowhere, gaunt and formidable, his face smeared with blood and dust.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" he shouted at Kergonec. "You fop, are you going to let 'em overrun you?"

Rough words, but there were worse to come.

"I can't be in two places at the same time, *nom d'un chien!* You damn pup, don't you know how to form a defensive front?"

"We're going to die!" began Kergonec, his eyes blazing. "You—"

"What the hell do I care!" roared the adjutant. "We'll die properly if we have to—not like a flock of—sheep!"

"You're under arrest—" Kergonec tried again.

"Arrest, hell!" said the adjutant. "Get out of my way!"

He whipped the remnant of two platoons out from under cover.

"Stand up!" he shouted. "Take open order! By the left, extend! Double!"

They trotted out and swung into line, three paces interval between files.

"*Le hausse à cent mètres*—sights at one hundred meters! Prepare for salvo. Fire!"

The front of the Arabs rush caved in, filled up and came on again. Bullets hosed it down. The line of Legionnaires was a rock. Against it the Ouled-Farik dashed themselves in vain. Again and again they massed among the boulders and flung themselves at the guns. Each time they were driven back with bullet and bayonet and steel shod gun butts. When the attack waned the marksmen on the hillside opened up again . . .

"Well done!" cried Kergonec, forgetting everything save the splendid courage of those fierce, powder blackened men. "I'm proud of you, Legionnaires!"

One trooper not very far away spat between his teeth.

"All right," grunted the adjutant, "but what are you going to do now?"

"Do? Die!" exclaimed Kergonec. "That's all we can do. But we'll die fighting and our deaths—"

"Keep that stuff for patriotic speeches some other time," panted the adjutant. "We've got to get out of this."

"Retreat?" a dark flush spread over Kergonec's face. "Never!"

"Oh, you blathering species of a calf-head!" yelled the adjutant, "we came out to see if the pass was clear. It's not clear. The whole tribe's in revolt. Use your eyes. There's going to be hell to pay. We *must* get back and warn the garrison."

"We can't!" began Kergonec. "And don't try to tell me what is the honorable thing to do. We're trapped—"

"Then we'll fight our way out of it instead of being butchered."

Kergonec's nerves snapped. He cried, "I'll teach you to insult me!" and he snatched his revolver from its holster. But the adjutant forestalled him. He thrust the butt end of his rifle against Kergonec's elbow. The latter gave a sharp cry of pain; his arm dangled at his side.

"If you interfere again I'll kill you," declared the adjutant. "I've got work to do!"

He did it without fuss or flurry. Under his leadership the battered remnants of the company fell back in perfect order. Retreating, fighting, retreating again through the storm of bullets. They carried Kergonec along with them, whimpering and snarling as he nursed his injured arm. Their stolid indifference angered

him immeasurably. Death, victory, defeat seemed to be all one to them.

THE RUNNING fight lasted until the hills receded and the pass broadened out. Then the rebels made their last attempt to cut off and annihilate the handful of exhausted men. They rushed—a compact body of them—lean, bare-legged hillsmen gone mad with the noise and the smell of powder.

Kergonec saw them coming and he knew that the end was at hand. There were not seventy Legionnaires—there must have been four hundred Arabs—and he cursed because his right arm was useless. At least he could take command and show the rebels how a Spahi officer died.

"*En carré!*" he shouted. "Form square!"

But his voice was lost in the tumult, which only the adjutant's brassy roar could overtop.

"Fix bayonets!" rang the order.

Out came the bright steel blades.

"Now then, my rabbits," cried the adjutant, "we're going home. Back to the hutch and salad leaves. Come on, you *salopards!* Charge! Get at 'em!"

Shoulder to shoulder, a steel tipped wedge, they hurled themselves at the oncoming horde. *Man af!* The steel went home to the hilt. Up came the gun butts to crash down on the turbaned head. And home went the steel again, kissing the bare brown skins.

For a second or so the two lines stood locked together, then the Legion went through, driving into the mob as a knife cuts through butter. And Lieutenant Kergonec, stumbling over the corpses inside the wedge where he had been thrust, came upon the adjutant sprawling spread-eagled and magnificent on a heap of Ouled-Farik tribesmen, with a bone-handled knife in his heart. There was a ghoulish grin on the dead face which made Kergonec shudder.

There would be no court martial for the adjutant now. He was through—he had died leading his men in battle. His sightless eyes, beneath the mass of crawling flies, seemed to wink at the lieutenant. Kergonec stepped over the corpse and hurried on . . .

The Ouled-Farik were giving way. The bayonets cut a red channel through their ranks—and suddenly they broke and fled toward the safety of their hills, leaving the valley in possession of sixty grim devils.

There was no cheering. Panting, they leaned on their rifles and peered from under the brims of their *képis* at the lieutenant. He started to congratulate them, but the words died away on his lips when he caught sight of the smoldering fire in their eyes. He fastened his numb right arm inside his tunic, squared his shoulders and glared back at the sullen faces. He wasn't afraid of a pack of Legionnaires who turned tail and ran from their enemies! His Spahis wouldn't have done that!

So, after a minute's rest he sent them to pick up their wounded, and started back at once toward el Kelima. It was late in the afternoon when they reached the redoubt.

On the terrace of the residence the guests of the garrison were having tea. A gentleman sitting on the balustrade holding a cup in his hand caught sight of the weary, bloodstained, powder blackened crew straggling up the road. He put down his cup with a rattle.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed. "One would say that there had been a battle! But yes, there has been a battle. Look, they carry wounded men!"

Everybody present was gathered along the balustrade staring at the grim procession moving slowly along toward the gate of the redoubt.

"*Zut!*" said M. Delacroix, the resident administrator from Mogador, "*zut*, that means we'll be delayed in this hole (he was calling it a hole already) and I shall miss the council meeting. That's what comes of exposing oneself to such grave dangers. Racecourse, *zut!*"

"Oh, but do look!" cried a lady. "That's Lieutenant Kergonec with his

arm in a sling. He's wounded, the poor boy!"

"Yes," agreed a second lady. "Isn't he splendid! He strides along . . ."

LIEUTENANT KERGONEC meant well. He didn't intend to tell the colonel anything but the truth, but somehow or other the truth became badly bent before he was through explaining what had happened.

"Why," exclaimed de Liancourt, popping his eyes wide open, "why, it's a mutiny! Nothing less. Mutiny! Lucky for him he's dead!"

He was referring to that dastardly adjutant.

"Broke your arm, did he?" exclaimed the colonel.

The arm was not broken, although the elbow was badly sprained. Kergonec quoted the surgeon's remarks about sinovial fluid . . . A matter of days before he could use his arm again.

"Too bad, too bad! Still, after what you've told me, I'm not overanxious to make use of those Legionnaires. Good God! They might join the rebels! Isn't that so, Monvallon? We can't have that happen! We'll drill some sense into them!"

"I'm afraid you're quite right, *mon Colonel*," sighed Kergonec. "They're not dependable. I—er—tried to fight it out in the pass when we were first attacked, but," he shrugged his shoulders, "they wouldn't stand and, of course, the rebels took heart and followed us up."

"The cowards!" cried the colonel. "*Eh bien, mon cher* Kergonec, you did all you could under the circumstances! The trouble, I can see, is deep seated. I suppose poor Lafeuillade was very slack. Very slack indeed! Ah well, poor fellow—gone! *Que diable!* We must face the future.

"We have to retrieve our prestige, gentlemen. Kergonec, I'll give you a week to put some sense into your men's heads—to teach them to respect their officers. Meanwhile, we'll have to carry on as best we can."

THE *KAID* had not overemphasized the vast hold Ahmed ben Zeroual had over the hillsmen. Within twenty-four hours the Djedir Range was aflame from end to end. Two isolated observation posts were wiped out; the company of Moroccan Tirailleurs came limping back to el Kelima with a swarm of rebels close on their heels. That night the oasis was placed in a state of siege.

The garrison was strong enough to take care of itself but was far too weak to cope with the uprising. Colonel de Liancourt dispatched a messenger with a request for reinforcements. At dawn the next day the messenger's head was found outside the redoubt with the message stuffed in the mouth.

"It's useless to sacrifice any more men," declared de Liancourt. "It will take ten battalions to blast a way through the pass. We'll have to wait. Headquarters is bound to find out soon."

So, cut off from the outside world, they waited.

Disaster followed disaster. A Spahi detachment stationed on the outskirts of the oasis was rushed; the rebels poured through and reached the native town before they could be halted. There was a wild fight in among the mudwalled gardens and the irrigation ditches by the light of the burning town.

Massed machine gun fire drove off the rebels at last, but the situation was growing unpleasantly warm. After the first hour of panic, the civilian guests of the mess had accepted the inevitable and were doing their best to help. They lived in an atmosphere of romance and sacrifice and devotion.

At night, behind the mattressed windows of the mess there were concerts. They sang and laughed, flirted and were brave. Now that the worst had happened, no one thought of blaming de Liancourt, not even the resident administrator from Mogador. They knew that had it not been for the cowardice of the Legionnaires the murderers would have been arrested and the rebellion would have been still-born.

Lieutenant Kergonec was both a hero and an object of universal sympathy. It was sad to think that his men had let him down so disgracefully, but he was fine and determined and no one doubted that before long he would have his men drilled into a better frame of mind. With his arm in a sling he was a popular figure around the piano of an evening, for he had a good tenor voice, and it was quite romantic to hear him sing "Softly Awakes My Heart" while stray bullets thudded against the walls.

A WEEK went by. A week of fighting; a week of uncertainty and alarm. The rebels, having sacked the town of el Kelima, had retreated into the hills, but there was no safety outside the walls of the redoubt. Snipers infested the hilltops and lurked among the trees.

With the meager force at his disposal Colonel de Liancourt did good work. Daily there were sallies into enemy country. The Spahis met and conquered a *harka* of two hundred guns which had come in from the desert to help plunder el Kelima. The Moroccan Tirailleurs drove the last rebels out of the oasis and advanced five kilometers up the pass before they were checked. They came back badly mauled but covered with glory. Colonel de Liancourt thanked them publicly and the ladies, gathered on the steps of the mess, clapped their hands and waved handkerchiefs.

The only people who took no share in the hardships or the glory were the sixty survivors of No. 4 Company of the Foreign Legion. They were confined to their own barracks and discreetly guarded by a Tirailleur machine gun crew. They were in disgrace, and under grave suspicion. They had been informed by Colonel de Liancourt in person, first, that the rebellion was entirely due to their cowardly retreat; second, that they were cowards; and third, that he would not honor them with his confidence until they had rehabilitated themselves, as he called it. At first they were too flabbergasted to understand what the old man was talking about, but when the full meaning of his words dawned upon them, it ate into their brain and festered like a sore.

Kergonec drilled them like a pack of recruits, making them form fours while over the walls drifted the spit and crackle of rifle fire. For a while they endured the degradation in sullen silence, and the lieutenant mistook their sullenness for docility. He even went so far as to assure the colonel that in a few days they would be fit for duty.

"I don't believe it, my boy," declared de Liancourt. "No, I don't. I admire your pluck, of course, but I wouldn't send you out with that gang of cutthroats, not if our lives depended upon it. As soon as help arrives those scoundrels go back to the base. The penal battalion can take care of them."

"Perhaps they deserve another chance," pleaded Kergonec who was not quite as convinced of the men's guilt as he should have been.

"No—no—and no!" snapped the colonel. "It's too risky. Couldn't think of it! Keep them hard at work—that's all we can do. But trust them? Never! I'm older than you are, my boy. I know more about men. A regiment when it goes to pieces like this—useless! Isn't that so, Monvallon, useless?"

"Quite so, *mon Colonel*," agreed Monvallon. "Oh—quite so!"

AND THE colonel's fears were quite justified, as Kergonec discovered the next morning. It was 5.30 A.M. when he appeared, and the Legionnaires should have been practising the advance in artillery formation. But they were doing nothing of the sort. They were standing about in little groups and made no attempt to smarten up and appear busy when they caught sight of him. The senior sergeant marched up, saluted and started to say—

"The men—"

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Kergonec. "Have you all gone crazy?

This isn't a holy day, *sacré nom d'un chien!* Fall in!"

"The men won't fall in," retorted the sergeant. "They're through—and what's more, I don't blame them!"

"What's this?" shouted Kergonec. "A mutiny?"

"Call it what you like, *mon Lieutenant.* You can have us shot, but *tonnerre de Dieu,* we'll stand no more of this! You—" the sergeant forgot himself and shook his fist in Kergonec's face—"you lied, you dirty little lout! You lied, lousy coward that you are, and we have to take the blame! Shoot us down, or send us back to do our job—outside! *This* rotten business has lasted long enough. Bring out the colonel—we'll tell him how you acted up there in the pass!"

"Silence!" ordered Kergonec, backing away from the large hairy fist.

"There's been too much silence. You damned us with your lies, but the Legionnaires are not Spahis, *mon Lieutenant. We're* men and we're proud of our regiment!"

Here Lieutenant Kergonec had the bad taste to laugh. He started to say something derisive about pride and Legionnaires, and the next thing he knew all the Legionnaires began to howl like maniacs, and a stone, sailing through the air, collided heavily with his left ear. Other stones followed thick and fast. There was only one sensible thing to do; he retreated hastily out of the compound and the Moroccan Tirailleurs, mounting guard outside, rushed their machine gun into position in the gateway.

"Don't fire unless they try to get out," ordered Kergonec, swabbing blood out of his mouth. "Only, if they try to rush you—then let them have it!"

He found Colonel de Liancourt and his staff captain breakfasting on the veranda of the residency.

"*Mon Colonel,*" he announced in a breathless voice, "I have to inform you that the Legionnaires have mutinied!"

De Liancourt put down his coffee cup and thrust his monocle into his eye.

"I knew it!" he declared. "Knew it all along! What did I tell you, Monvallon? The dirty dogs—a mutiny! *Sapristi!* Well, well, Kergonec, my boy, do be explicit. What has happened?"

The lieutenant tried to give a coherent account of the events as he had witnessed them.

"You see!" cried de Liancourt. "It had to come. Inevitable! Here we are, fighting with our backs to the wall, and the only white troops at my disposal mutiny! Filthy swine! Traitors! No honor, no decency, no courage, nothing! Rotten from top to bottom. Sergeants, everybody! Why, I don't think they would care if all our guests were massacred—if indeed, *I* were murdered. They are not human . . . Excuse me, my coffee's growing cold."

He snatched up his cup with a vicious gesture and the coffee slopped over into the saucer.

Captain Monvallon dropped the cigaret he had been smoking into a brass ash tray and, having dusted a bit of lint off the knee of his trousers, drawled—

"By the way, Kergonec—your mutineers—any ammunition?"

"No, sir, none."

"Then they ought to be easily disposed of, I should think. Our entire scheme of defense will be thrown out of gear if we have to waste time guarding those Legionnaires."

"Waste! We'll waste nothing!" retorted the colonel. "We're going to get the ringleaders and pack the others in the cells—at once. They'll live to be sorry! Fifteen years apiece with the penal battalion at the minimum! Mutiny in the face of the enemy—terrible offense. Terrible! Come, Monvallon! Kergonec! We must act at once!"

At that precise moment the officer of the day marched out on to the veranda and informed the colonel that a Lieutenant Grellon, of the 1st Regiment of the Foreign Legion, had just reached the redoubt and was waiting for orders in the Salle de Rapport. The officer of the day endeavored to make this statement as matter of fact as possible, but he could

not wholly conceal his almost febrile excitement.

Colonel de Liancourt's prominent eyes bulged like agates.

"*Comment?*" he inquired sharply. "The reinforcements have arrived! I heard nothing. Did you hear anything, Monvallon?"

Before the staff captain could assure the colonel that he had heard nothing at all, the officer went on to explain.

"There's only this one man, *mon Colonel.* This Lieutenant Grellon. He says he came through from Ain Seffra—"

"How did he get through? The pass is blocked—full of rebels!" sputtered the Colonel. "It's— Anyway, tell him to come here at once. Now then, my boy, quickly. Send him along here at once. Smartly now!"

TWO MINUTES later Lieutenant Grellon of the Foreign Legion appeared on the veranda.

He was a large, uncouth creature; long armed, bull necked, barrel chested, lantern jawed and as ugly as sin. His right ear was out of shape and he had no left ear at all. The uniform he wore was faded and threadbare; his stripes were tarnished and he badly needed a shave. A more unprepossessing officer, if he was an officer, Colonel de Liancourt had never before seen. All the officers he had gathered about him at el Kelima were gentlemen; this man looked like a gorilla! In fact, he *was* a gorilla. Such hands—huge, coarse hands, with dirty fingernails!

"Good God!" the Colonel exclaimed in the back of his mind. "What's the army coming to?"

Aloud he said—

"Lieutenant Grellon, I believe?"

"That's me," agreed the gorilla in a hard, unmannerly voice which grated on the colonel's ears. "Grellon. 1st Regiment of the Legion. H. Q. sent me down."

"Ah!" said de Liancourt. "Glad to have you with us. Although I must say I'm astounded. Yes, astounded. How you managed to get through is a mystery to me—to us all. You have your papers, of course? Naturally, naturally—" He handed the documents over to his staff captain. "A formality. Your arrival is opportune, I must say. Our Legionnaires, I must inform you, are in open mutiny! I was on my way to—"

"What's that?" barked the gorilla. "Number Four has mutinied?"

He seemed to loom, massive and enormous, above the colonel, and there was a scowl on his countenance which was positively upsetting. Kergonec was almost tempted to step between the colonel and this great brute. But on second thought he decided not to interfere. Moreover, the colonel was in no way intimidated.

"Lieutenant," he snapped, "you forget your manners. I do not expect to be interrupted by my subalterns when I am speaking. Number Four Company of the Legion *has* mutinied. Here is Lieutenant Kergonec who was brutally assaulted less than ten minutes ago."

"I thought Captain Lafeuillade was in command," remarked Grellon, giving Kergonec a coldly appraising glance.

"He's dead, poor fellow! Our first casualty, alas! Monvallon, *mon cher,* will you be good enough to order a section of Spahis to stand by in readiness to deal with the mutineers? And you, Lieutenant—er—Grellon, sit down, won't you? I am anxious to know how you got through single handed!"

The chair creaked beneath Grellon's weight. He sat hunched up, with his clenched fist resting on his knees, looking, the colonel thought, more simian than ever. His big jaw muscles bulged and he had a way of canting his head forward and of peering out through his heavy eyebrows so that he looked as if dark and monstrous thoughts rolled at the back of his mind.

The colonel could not help thinking what a terrible impression such a creature would make on his guests. It was bad enough to be surrounded by rebels, to be completely cut off from the outside world,

without having to come in contact with such a monkey! A ranker, of course—a Legionnaire who had climbed out of the ranks. Worthy fellow, no doubt, but hardly the type of man one wanted to associate with in mess. And what of the ladies—the sorely tried ladies!

The colonel and Kergonec exchanged a glance full of sympathy, doubt and mild disgust. They belonged to a different social order, and the presence of this ranker made them keenly conscious of their immense superiority. Still, *noblesse oblige* . . .

"A cigaret, Lieutenant?" suggested de Liancourt, adopting the bluff hearty manner.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll smoke this," answered Grellon drawing a venerable pipe from his coat pocket.

"And now if you don't mind—" murmured the colonel, edging his chair out of reach of the foul blue smoke coming from the pipe.

GRELLON'S account of his journey was terse and matter of fact. He had been at the depot at Ain Seffra, and had been ordered to join No. 4 Company at el Kelima as second in command. There being no convoy due for another two weeks, he had traveled south with a caravan. The caravan had been held up in the Djedir foothills. From what he said and the way he said it, an uncritical audience might have thought that the caravan had been held up in a traffic jam.

He went on to explain that he had sent back the survivors with a message to H. Q. informing the zone commander of the aggression, while he had come on to el Kelima. And that was all there was to it. He had sucked thoughtfully at his pipe, and stared through his eyebrows at the colonel.

"But, *mon Dieu!*" exclaimed the latter. "The hills—full of rebels—impassable! Why, I sent—let me see—three messengers. Not one got through. There's been fighting right here at el Kelima, although we drove them off, of course. Drove them off. Heavy losses. And yet you say you managed to get through, almost a hundred kilometers, alone!"

Grellon shrugged the matter aside.

"I was all through these hills ten or twelve years ago," he vouchsafed. "I know the trail. These Ouled-Farik—they only think they can fight."

And that was the sum total of his explanation. The mere fact that he had crossed a supposedly uncrossable range of hills, peopled by a wild tribe in the first flush of triumphant rebellion, did not seem to him to warrant much comment. He had been in tighter corners than that. He was, as the colonel surmised, a ranker commissioned after twenty years' service.

He had been sent to the officers' training school at St. Maixent by a wise old general who knew good men when he met them, but the two gold stripes he had earned had not altered Grellon's character. He remained what he had always been, the world's hardest boiled egg. First, last and all the time he was a Legionnaire, and in him love of his regiment was paramount. The rest, everything else in creation, was just so much superfluous bunk.

He had been told to report at el Kelima; so, after the caravan had been butchered, he had come on alone. Orders were orders. He worked his way from one end of the Bou Hadîde Pass to the other, at night and by stealth. Twice he met prowlers, and twice he throttled them with his bare hands. He had suffered from hunger and thirst; by day the sun had roasted him, but these were trivialities not worth a passing comment.

He had reached el Kelima—and this little squeaking colonel with a piece of glass in his eye was trying to make him believe that a company of Legionnaires had mutinied!

"Had it not been for the conduct of those Legionnaires," retorted de Liancourt, "there would have been no rebellion at all. Isn't that so, Kergonec? If those men had followed you the rebellion would have been smothered!"

"That's quite true," agreed Kergonec. "Had they followed me—"

"And now they have mutinied!" the colonel went on. "But I'll see they're punished. Ringleaders shot! Cells and prison for the others!"

"That leaves me without a job," put in Grellon. "Look here, *mon Colonel*, suppose I try my hand and see what I can do with 'em. I know Legionnaires."

"You couldn't do anything. Quite hopeless, isn't that so, Kergonec?"

"They threw stones at me," the lieutenant admitted.

"Huh," remarked Grellon. "Stones, eh? I used to be in command of No. 4. Want me to see what I can do?"

"There's only one thing to be done—treat them like the scum they are. I'll shoot them down if they give any more trouble!"

"Maybe so, I don't know anything about that. But if you need every available man, why not let me look 'em over?"

The colonel, who felt morally certain that nothing could be done, snapped:

"Certainly, certainly! I'll give you fifteen minutes in which to restore order. Not a minute more. Otherwise I'll send in my Spahis to tame those mutineers!"

It would do this ruffian a lot of good, he thought, if he were taken down a peg or two. He was much too cocksure.

LEGIONNAIRES, most of them, are a reckless, tough, bitter crew. They join the Legion because they have found life irksome for some one of a thousand reasons, and they don't care very much what happens. Few men with any hope of the future would throw away five years of their life for one cent a day.

If they fall into unintelligent hands, no amount of discipline can control them; they kick over the traces, and everything may be expected to happen, and to happen violently. Desperate men with nothing to live for—who have been robbed even of their pride in the regiment—are not amenable to sweet reason.

But if, as is not infrequent, they are led by officers whom they respect and trust, those officers are in luck, for they have at their command one of the finest fighting machines on earth, combining the dash of the French, with the bulldog grit of the German and the fatalism of the Slav. For the right man such an outfit will fight and work and die without a whimper of complaint.

And such a man was Lieutenant Grellon.

When he came marching out on to the parade ground of No. 4 he began by telling the Moroccan machine gun crew to take their damned weapon and shove it down their throats.

The mutineers, expecting the worst, were grouped in the patch of shade. They had no ammunition, but they had rifles and bayonets, and they were waiting for somebody—anybody—to come and disarm them. Trouble and violence were exactly what they wanted, and nothing would have suited them better than a bloody fight. They were, as the senior sergeant had told Kergonec, through. They were through with the shame and the dishonor they had done nothing to earn.

They were through being cursed and insulted by upstart young lieutenants and sputtering colonels. They were sick and tired of being penned in like criminals, and of being stared at by awe stricken ladies who commented quite loudly upon the troopers' really bestial looks. Through with the whole boiling. Rebellions? They should worry! Prison and death? Why not?

So they stood in a sullen pack and waited for a chance to even up the score. And out across the parade ground stamped Grellon, alone, unarmed, a mountain of a man.

"Grellon!" cried a trooper.

"Yes, Grellon—what about it!" thundered the lieutenant.

Midway across the parade ground he halted and confronted the Legionnaires, squarely planted on his big feet, his fists on his hips, his jaw thrust forward.

"*Alors quoi?*" he demanded. "I leave you for a few months, my rabbits, and I come back to find this! Do you want to break my heart, band of camels that you

are?" He looked as if he were more likely to break a few heads. "Anyway, I'll stand no more of these antics. I'm in command of this outfit now, and *par le bon Dieu* I'll make you sit up! You lousy, lop-eared, crapulous swine—fall in! Markers—"

They knew *him!* They knew all about old man Grellon! He had led them for years. They had been with him when that Chleuh goatherd lopped off his ear, and another Chleuh drove a spear into his side. *Sacré tonnerre!* That had been a fight! Grellon had torn out the spear and led his wolves to the last assault of Bir-Malloud.

With him, thank God, they were safe.

And a cheer went up—a riotous, clamorous cheer, a yell which scared the civilian guests half to death and brought Colonel de Liancourt racing toward the "scene of disorder" at the head of a detachment of Spahis with drawn sabers.

If Grellon experienced either pleasure or pride he hid it remarkably well.

"Stop that howling!" he ordered. "Markers, this way! Fall in, No. 4 Company!"

The mutineers were mutineers no longer. Back slid the bayonets into the scabbards, and when Colonel de Liancourt burst on to the parade ground there was no mob for him to subdue.

No. 4 Company was drawn up in two ranks, eyes front, motionless.

"Company!" thundered Grellon. "Present arms!"

There never had been a mutiny. With a smack and a rattle the rifles came up to the present, crisp, quick, businesslike—all together.

"But," exclaimed Colonel de Liancourt, "I do not comprehend! The ringleaders—are they under arrest?"

"No, sir. So far as I can make out, there are no ringleaders."

"You think you can trust those men?" There was a sneer behind the question.

"With my life," retorted Grellon in a loud, grating voice. "With yours too, for that matter, *mon Colonel.*"

The colonel felt no inclination to pursue the conversation in so public a place. He didn't like Grellon's way of shouting things so that everybody could hear for miles around. This Grellon was a damn' outsider. There must be sanctions and reprisals; an example must be made. But it must be done quietly and in good order.

"Dismiss your men," he snapped, "and come to the office at once."

"Certainly," agreed Grellon, still in the same booming voice, "and it will be an effect on your goodness, *mon Colonel,* to order the removal of that machine gun and those armed guards. I'll stand personally responsible for the conduct of my men."

"Impossible," the word whistled between de Liancourt's teeth. To avoid further argument with this insubordinate ruffian, he wheeled his horse about and cantered away.

"Now then," went on Grellon to the men, "I'll give you half an hour to clean up. Just now you're the dirtiest bunch of swine in creation. Dismiss!"

They grinned at him.

THE INTERVIEW in the colonel's office was stormy. It dragged out for the best part of two hours, and it ended, thanks to the intervention of Staff Captain Monvallon, in a complete victory for Grellon.

De Liancourt wanted the ringleaders—he insisted upon there being ringleaders—tried by summary court martial and shot. Moreover, he was, he declared, absolutely opposed to the further use of No. 4 Company. They were untrustworthy to the *n*th degree. They were a menace, a canker; their conduct had unfitted them to take any part in the defence of el Kelima.

That was where Grellon broke in. He said:

"They're my men, and I know them. They're sound, but they've been deviled just a bit too much. Leave 'em to me. Look here, why not let me take them out, away from this place—a flying column? If we get chewed up, you won't

miss us. On the other hand, we might do some good."

"Rubbish!" retorted de Liancourt. "Never heard such rubbish in my life!"

And that was when Monvallon butted in.

"Just a word in your ear, *mon Colonel*," he drawled, "if Lieutenant Grellon will be so good as to excuse us?"

Grellon excused them with a grunt.

The staff captain's suggestion carried weight. He pointed out the Lieutenant Grellon was really not the sort of person one would like to have in a mess—not with ladies about. Observe his dirty nails and his large boots. His language was coarse. Another fortnight might go by before the guests could leave, and if they had to associate with a man of Grellon's type they would carry away a disastrous impression of the mess. The thing to do was to get rid of him. Let him take out his Legionnaires—they seemed to listen to him—and if they ran into trouble, *mon Dieu*, they alone would suffer. And perhaps it would serve them right!

For the first time in days the colonel's face beamed.

"Yes," he agreed. "Yes, of course. Wonderful, Monvallon. You're quite right. In fact, that very thought was in my mind—"

LATE that evening the flying column left el Kelima and disappeared. A few stray shots were heard coming from the southern end of the oasis; then silence.

"I believe," laughed Kergonec, "I really believe that great oaf is taking his men out into the desert, as far from the rebels as he can get! Judging by the sound of those shots, that's what he's doing."

"But it's such a weight off all our minds," declared Mme. Perigoud. "It's such a relief not to have those foreigners cooped up with us here. One breathes more easily."

"And did you see that new officer?" exclaimed another lady. "One look at him was enough for me!"

And everybody agreed that the colonel had done the right thing, the only possible thing, in fact. He accepted their congratulations simply and modestly.

With the Legionnaires out of the way, the task of defending the oasis went ahead in grim earnest.

The very next morning a village fifteen kilometers away was raided and burned, and the following day a pitched battle developed in the mouth of the pass. It was an indecisive affair, for the Ouled-Farik refused to come down and fight like men. They stayed behind the boulders on the hillside and peppered the troops which tried to dislodge them.

But Colonel de Liancourt was quite pleased with the results obtained, for the rebels had retreated in disorder after a machine gun, which had been brought into position on the crest of the hill started shooting them in the back.

He returned to el Kelima firmly convinced that the morale of the Ouled-Farik was shattered and that as soon as reinforcements arrived he would make short work of the uprising.

"Their hearts are not in it," he dedeclared at dinner. "They don't fight as they used to. Why, if I only had a few more troops at my disposal I could put an end to this affair at once!"

His pleasure, however, was marred by the arrival in the middle of the night of a messenger with a dispatch from H. Q. A tersely worded document expressing official astonishment at the violence of the explosion. It reminded Colonel de Liancourt of his many assurances as to the peacefulness of the territory, and it trusted with much acid politeness that he would be able to subdue the Ouled-Farik without putting H. Q. to the expense and trouble of reinforcements. If, within the next fortnight, he did not succeed in restoring order, then a relief column would "proceed to el Kelima" and, subsequently, it might be necessary to reorganize the administration of the territory.

"Now look at that!" cried de Liancourt, shaking the message at arm's length. "You see what happens, Monvallon?

This is my reward for years of selfless devotion. Those filthy Legionnaires! If they had not failed me there would have been no rebellion. But can I make H. Q. understand this? No! Impossible. They desire to blame *me!*"

Captain Monvallon expressed the exact amount of sympathy expected of him. He was a reliable staff captain.

"By the way," he added, "I was forgetting: The runner brought in another message—a verbal one from Lieutenant Grellon."

"What? He's still alive? What's he doing? Skulking somewhere, I suppose. Well, well, let's hear the worst—what has he to say for himself?"

Grellon, it appeared, had come upon a large gathering of natives, at least two thousand of them, at a well not four hours' march from el Kelima. He thought they were massing for an attack in force on the redoubt, and he had the honor to inform the colonel that he was going to keep in contact with this large force until he found out in what direction it intended to move.

"What was the name of the well where he saw this vision?"

"Hassi Amar."

"Good God!" cried de Liancourt. "At Hassi Amar! Right in the pass! Astounding! I don't believe it. You know you don't believe it, do you, Monvallon? Fetch the map, will you?"

Monvallon produced a map. The Hassi Amar well was situated midway up the Bou Hadîde Pass at a Point where it widened out to form a circular basin of about three kilometers in diameter. The floor of this basin was a flat, sunbaked plain, covered with loose stones. The well itself stood at the foot of a sheer wall of red rock. In time of peace caravans pitched their tents beneath the handful of scraggly trees which surrounded the well.

"Now then, what did I tell you?" the colonel went on, tapping the map with his fingernail. "You can see for yourself it's absurd. We've tried to get up the pass twice. It can't be done. And yet our friend the gorilla pretends to have gone halfway through! Next thing we'll hear he's reached Ain Seffra!"

The life of a staff captain is difficult. It took Monvallon a quarter of an hour to make his colonel change his mind. In the end the befuddled, sleepy native messenger had to be produced for further questioning. He declared that he had been stopped by the Legionnaires at the northern end of the Hassi Amar Basin. They had taken him a round about way through the hills, and had shown him the lights of the rebel camp.

"Two thousand rebels," mused the colonel, after the messenger had been dismissed. He stared at the map for some minutes; then abruptly he smacked it with so much violence that Monvallon winced.

"If that's the case," snapped de Liancourt, "if those Legionnaires can do it, so can we. Surprise, that's the great thing!"

And he went on to outline the great scheme which had just occurred to him: Night march up the pass. Catch the rebels off their guard by the well. Annihilate them . . .

Monvallon attempted to point out the possible danger of a night march through unsettled country. The colonel waved all such considerations aside—flipped them aside. Surprise attack. Roll them back. Catch them at dawn. Force them to fight. He'd done it before.

"It's never failed," he asserted. "That's how I caught Abd-el-Kebir up at Wezzaan. And before that at Tijane. When one knows for certain where to find the enemy, decision, speed—they're the things that count."

In his own mind he felt sure of success; he was not at all impressed by the exploit of that lumbering, clumsy clod of a fellow, Grellon. Any one could do as much if he chose to skulk under cover and run away from the enemy.

"We're going to do it—at once!" he concluded. "It will be our answer to the sneers of H. Q! Two thousand rebels! *Mon Dieu,* Monvallon, the rebellion is practically over."

Monvallon agreed that, of course, the chances of success were excellent but he wondered whether the troops were in a fit condition to march thirty kilometers and fight a pitched battle when they reached their objective. They had been in action the day before, and—

"They've had ten hours' rest," broke in the colonel. "Have *I* had ten minutes' rest? No, I have not! Nor have you, yet we're both very fresh. Same thing with the men, exactly the same. Battle's a tonic."

AN HOUR later, at half past three, the el Kelima garrison was under way. Every available Spahi, and every Moroccan Tirailleur with the exception of one company left behind to guard the redoubt. No talking was allowed, no smoking; hoofs were muffled; bayonet scabbards were hitched up into the men's belts to keep them from clinking.

Twenty-five kilometers were covered at a steady pace. A gray tinge was in the sky, and the advance guard was almost within rifle range of the Hassi Amar Well when, without warning, the scouts were greeted by a crackle of musketry. The sound rattled and echoed against the walls of the pass. While there was a great deal of noise there were few casualties, for the light was still bad.

"Push straight on!" de Liancourt told the commander of the leading company. "Don't let anything stop you!"

So they pushed straight on and the watchman on the hillside ceased fire. But a minute later, out of the shadows poured a living torrent, which engulfed scouts and advanced guard and stamped them into the ground. The leading company was almost overrun before it had time to swing into line and pour a ragged volley into the yelling horde rushing down upon it.

The tumult grew and spread all down the line of march.

The colonel sent in the Spahis to hack a way through the rebel ranks, but as they rode forward they became all snarled up with the hard pressed Tirailleurs, and the charge came to nothing. A cold gray light filtered down into the pass and a hail of murderous bullets beat against the close packed, jostling ranks.

Again the Ouled-Farik rushed and their yell carried high above the roll of the rifle fire. They closed in on the tangled mass of Spahis and Tirailleurs, hacked them down, tore into them—burst through. There for a minute they were brought to a halt by the combined fire of two companies of Moroccans who had had time to get into position.

But the hillsides were alive with snipers and those two companies were frittered away.

Full day. A thunder of guns in the dust choked pass. A carpet of dead men grinning at the sky. The swift lisp of the bullet—a long drawn yell—a glint of sunshine on polished steel. Red blades uptossed above cringing heads.

Ul! Al-lah-lah! Kill in the name of Allah, for the French are breaking. *Kill!*

White *burnous* and gray *djellaba*, hillsmen and desert prowlers fighting side by side; hate twisted faces crying their hate out of wide open mouths. *Ul-ll-l!* The dogs are running . . .

Colonel de Liancourt tried to stem the tide, tried to fight with jaded troops, tried to rally broken men. And he failed. He sent two detachments to clear the rebels off the hills. They were smashed and driven back. He sent in the Spahis to meet the rush, to delay it. But they couldn't form up for the charge in the boulder strewn, corpse studded valley.

Monvallon? Where in God's name was Monvallon? Shot through the face and a hole as big as a fist in the back of his head, lying at the foot of a brain splashed boulder.

The troops were falling back in disorder, running humpbacked beneath the singing lead.

For a moment de Liancourt went mad. He beat at frightened Tirailleurs with the flat of his sword. But he was dismounted and they swept him aside.

Cowards! If only they would stand

they could whip those lousy rebels. But they could not be made to face about. They had no officers to lead them. Behind them, not far away, were gaunt, blood crazed hillsmen in untold thousands . . .

So they fled, sweeping de Liancourt along with them. They fled down the pass toward el Kelima where behind stout walls there would be safety. They were town bred men, those Tirailleurs, a mongrel riff-raff recruited up north; and no match, except when the odds were in their favor, for the men of the Djedir hills.

It was Lieutenant Kergonec who rescued the colonel and helped him to mount a Spahi horse. Knee to knee they rode back in the midst of the panic stricken mob, mile after mile.

"When we reach the mouth of the pass," choked de Liancourt, "we must reorganize—counter attack. Otherwise we'll be overrun!"

His words were blown away by the hurricane of sound. A wounded trooper, clinging to his stirrup iron, slumped down with a bullet in his spine. At each step more and more men were dropping.

"Rally your Spahis!" he shouted angrily. "Hold back the rebels until we can get into the redoubt."

"Very good, *mon Colonel*," agreed Kergonec. "I shall—"

Then his lower jaw was shot away and he fell over sidewise against the colonel's thigh, staining it bright red before de Liancourt could draw away from the corpse.

The retreat became a rout, the rout a disaster. Under the high white sun of noon the panic stricken troops stumbled out of the pass and poured on across the shadowless plain.

DE LIANCOURT gave himself up as lost. The oasis was still over two miles away and in between the plain was scarred with deep gulleys carved out of the soft earth by the rains. In among these *oueds* the last of his command scattered and melted away in its mad dash toward the redoubt. Jaded horses collapsed; Spahis went on foot, dragging their spurred boots in the dust. Tirailleurs fought and clawed at each other as they scrambled in and out of the dry river beds. The road was blocked with fugitives and littered with discarded weapons.

And the Ouled-Farik were close behind, streaming down from their hills, sniping, running, sniping again—closing in on the heels of the beaten French. But they feared a trap once they reached the open. They came on warily, stopping ever and again to deal with the wounded whose screams drifted shrill and faint across the plains.

Colonel de Liancourt became conscious all at once of an uncanny stillness pressing against his eardrums. The crash of rifle fire had dwindled away to an occasional spat and crackle; stray bullets went by with a loud, prolonged whine; the dust muffled the sound of dragging feet . . .

After the monstrous clangor in the pass, after the wild struggle of a close packed, fear crazed throng, everything seemed to shrink in size and importance. Even the sting of defeat was attenuated. Little figures scattered across the land, trudged along, vanished, reappeared, trudged on again. Groups formed and dissolved. Occasionally a man fell and moved no more.

Dusty khaki uniforms blended with the dun colored earth, and it seemed to the colonel, because of a trick of his blurred eyes, that the men vanished altogether and that there were only small patches of deep blue shadows drifting across the ground. He cursed, sputtering. And far away, behind a veil of raw white sunlight, there was a gray swarming of other men. Drawing closer each second—rebels! The rebels he had gone out to defeat—who had smashed him to pieces. They were trying to cut him off from the shelter of the oasis. They were sifting around the right flank—driving the Tirailleurs before them.

He saw a frantic, shouting officer trying

to whip some men into line. The men swerved away, scattering like frightened sheep. Came the thud of a report. The officer—that was Dumonier!—threw up his arms, spun around and collapsed.

They were shooting their own officers! The swine! For the first time that day de Liancourt remembered his guests, and he winced at the thought of what might befall them, either at the hands of his own demoralized troops or those of the Ouled-Farik.

He must get back in time to warn them, to organize some sort of a defense. But his horse was too exhausted to trot. It stumbled along, head bent, clicking its hoofs over the stones. He was powerless to halt or delay the rebels; he had no hold over his own men.

His importence brought tears to his eyes. He was alone and helpless. Very probably he was going to die, cut down by those Ouled-Farik. His grimy fingers, stiff with dust and sweat, fumbled with the flap of the revolver holster on his saddle.

Then, cleaving the sunlit stillness, clear and shrill, a bugle call rang out. A single brassy voice leaping up to the sky. Disaster? It knew nothing of it. Fear and panic and rout? It ignored them all. It sang with cocksure defiance of glory and courage and death. The song of the Legion . . .

The colonel saw them coming—sixty men in a row, three paces between ranks, stretched out in one long line, moving straight toward him. Ahead, dead center, strode Lieutenant Grellon, ugly as sin, in rags, *képi* pulled down over his eyes, a rifle tucked under his arm. Behind him marched the bugler down whose bursting cheeks ran streams of perspiration.

Grellon marched up to the colonel's side and saluted with all the punctillio of battalion drill. His face was wooden as he announced—

"We'll cover the retirement, *Mon Colonel*, if those are your orders."

De Liancourt nodded his head. He couldn't speak, for his throat was clogged with dust, and inside of him he felt gray and old and useless.

So the line swung past him and as he rode on he heard the rasp of the sergeant's voice:

"Horrodinsky, thou species of a herring-face, you're falling behind! Get up! You're on parade, my lad! Is it the toe of my boot I must put against your pantaloon?"

Suddenly the bugle fell silent. Grellon's fog-horn of a voice drifted back to the colonel.

"*La hausse à deux cents*—sights at two hundred!"

And the sergeant echoed the order.

"Steady there! Wait for the order. Wait!"

Hours later, so it seemed to de Liancourt, a volley crashed out, then another and another. As he reached the trees he heard a machine gun sputter—crackle—sputter again—and settle down to a steady roar.

The Ouled-Farik were checked.

Grellon and his sixty men fought them off, held on to every inch of ground until their flanks were almost swamped, then they retreated and held on again.

But the tide was too strong to stem. The rebels went to earth in the gulleys, worked their way past the handful of men, and almost caught it between two fires. Almost, but not quite.

Grellon changed his line of retreat and reached the oasis without damage. There, among the mud walled gardens and the trees, he stood fast; for not two hundred yards away, caught in a confused, disorganized mass of men, Colonel de Liancourt was struggling to get into the redoubt.

It was a full half hour before the last man was under cover, and all that time the remains of No. 4 Company of the Legion, fought off its assailants. Sixty—fifty men against ten times their number. Their ammunition was exhausted, but they fought on with bayonet and gun butt and teeth and nails until Grellon at last gave the order to fall back.

And of the sixty men who had gone into action, only eleven reached the redoubt. Grellon, carrying the red hot

machine gun on his shoulder, came in last.

As the gate swung shut, the Moroccan Tirailleurs massed on the parapet, opened a withering fire on the rebels—who very carefully refrained from coming out into the open.

TEN DAYS later a relief column reached el Kelima and drove the rebels out of the oasis. There were great rejoicings. A general was in charge of operations, and the beleaguered garrison was drawn up for his inspection.

He saw the Spahis.

"My brave Spahis!" murmured de Liancourt.

He saw the Tirailleurs, complete with their regimental band.

"They did well," de Liancourt.

Lastly, he saw a group of eleven men, led by a giant of an officer who cried in a thundering voice—

"No. 4 Company of the Foreign Legion. 'Tention!"

And the eleven men came up to attention as if they had been an army corps.

"Badly depleted, I see," said the general.

"Quite," agreed de Liancourt, and he added in an offhand manner, "Very brave men, I find them to be. Reckless, in fact—but hard troops to handle. Very hard. I must say I had a lot of trouble with them for a while, but I tamed them, yes, I tamed them."

"Splendid," agreed the general, who was trying to think of some way of telling the colonel that he was being transferred to another, less exposed, post. "Of course, you did."

"But—ranker officers," went on the colonel, "speaking generally, of course, ranker officers are not quite the thing in a gentlemen's mess, are they?"

The general smiled.

"It all depends upon one's definition of a gentleman, does it not?" he commented. "For instance, Grellon, back there—as fine a fellow as ever wore stripes. Why, I had him commissioned myself! Years ago! I'm looking forward to a quiet chat with him this evening. And you had trouble with him, you say? I'm surprised."

De Liancourt's answer was inaudible, for as they passed down the ranks, Grellon's mighty bellow filled the air:

"No 4 Company! Stand at ease! *Repos!*"

And No. 4 Company, standing at ease, grinned at him.

Hard troops to handle!

Hell an' High Water

A Cowboy's Loyalty to his Outfit

By STEPHEN PAYNE

HELLO, Mr. Keys, come right in. Java's boilin' on the stove and we'll have supper in jig time. Mighty glad to see you come prognosticatin' out to your lonely range camp in the Ever Rollin' Hills, where you should ought to build the Key Hole range rider somethin' a mite better'n a dugout for a home.

How's things? Oh, all jake, I guess. I has had company of a kind, recent and plentiful—yeh, more'n plentiful—such as 'twas. Eh? You noticed the absence of one of my string of nine ponies from the pasture—the roan I called Tinhorn?

Eh? No, your eyes didn't deceive you. He ain't there, but I ain't traded him off or sold him or give him away. Then where is he? Well, I couldn't exactly say. The last I saw of that poor pony he was headed down Rawah River like he never intended to come back, and I don't reckon he will.

If you'll notice, the saddle lyin' out by that little corral ain't the hull I had when I fust went to work for you. It's one I kinda borrowed permanent, for I don't think the owner'll ever come after it . . . How does the company I's had, Rawah River, Tinhorn and the saddle connect up?

Light your pipe—the Java can wait—and get that hard, reproachful, questionin' look outa your eyes. I's sorry 'bout the

hoss, but I was some helpless at the time.

Two evenin's since comes along a small trail herd of mixed dogies travelin' north. Four men, a cook and mess wagon with the outfit, and they pitches camp here by the dugout. Big geezer with a pug nose tells me he's boss and his name is Red Harris, after I lets him know I's Carmody Grant, commonly known as Carm, range rider for the Key Hole, and that they's welcome to camp.

I eats with 'em and finds the cook sociable, but the three frozen faced waddies with Harris ain't much more communicative'n he is, and he sure don't spill no information 'bout where they's come from or goin' to. Red confines his remarks to questions 'bout the country, and they holds their herd—'round three hundred head—'bout half a mile out.

I figgers next mornin' as how I'll go out and look 'em over, and saddles up Tinhorn to do so; but that's where I figgers wrong. Harris and his waddies don't want them cattle looked at, anyhow not by me. I's tied my new rawhide rope to my hull and swung on, when Harris says, "Where to?" and I tells him.

"Oh, shucks," he says, "you'd just be wastin' your time. Our drove carries one straight brand and we'd 'a' spotted any stray of your'n that might have got into it. They's nothin' there, Carm."

"Such bein' the case, I won't find nothin' to do," says I. "But I's naturally curious to see what sort of stock you've got, an' it's jus' possible I might help you fellas clean 'em of strays if I watches 'em file past me."

Harris hasn't swung on to his bronc yet, but has walked over in front of me, the better to talk, while I's been speakin'. And as I concludes my remark he replies with the briefest and meatiest kind o' conversation possible—that of a drawn gun pointed awful straight at my nose.

"You'll not cut our herd," says he, and says it nasty. "And to see as you don't trouble us none, we's takin' you along with us, for I ain't sure how far, but as far as the Rawah River anyhow. You said 'twas powerful high, didn't you?"

I don't reply to that, but o' course the Rawah is high here in late June 'cause it's fed by the meltin' snow on them great white topped mountains away on the east, from which it comes down in a dozen branches that, unitin' gradual, heads west. And these birds with their trail herd is goin' to have to cross it.

AT THE moment I's watchin' the muzzle of Red Harris' gun sorta fascinated, for them things is doggoned hypnotic, you know. Then Red beckons to one of his hands, a slim, cold eyed kid name o' Claude—last name unmentioned. Claude seems to understand his boss's gestures and disarms me, appropriatin' my belt and gun for hisself and then tyin' me to my saddle with my own rawhide rope.

When this is done, Harris remarks:

"You're a hard boiled lookin' old scoundrel and I'll bet you've stole cattle aplenty. But at that I believe a fella could bank on you keepin' your word. So if you know which side your bread's buttered on, it'll be well for you to forget you ever seen us. Won't be no skin off your nose. This Key Hole outfit's rich an' has more cattle'n they knows what to do with. So if you cares to pass your word to forget all 'bout seein' us, and not to foller us nor nothin', why, I'll turn you loose. Kinda remember, too, if you don't, we may have to take precautions."

He's a pretty smooth talker, now that he's a mind to talk; and he don't rave nor nothin', nor glower and threaten, but he sure does make hisself clear. I don't match him a-tall for politeness in my comeback. Fact is, I jus' singes his ears with my opinion of him an' his outfit; and if mere looks would 'a' killed, him and Claude would 'a' died seventy times. And the upshot of the matter is that I goes north, up country, behind their dogies, tied good and solid to that Tinhorn hoss. I's so doggoned mad, though, it's a wonder the rope holdin' me don't burn up, I's that hot.

And I keeps gettin' hotter every minute, as I sees dozens of choice Key

Hole cows and young steers in that herd. But that bunch o' thieves ain't got enough of our stock yet to suit 'em, an' they keeps cuttin' a few choice critters from small bunches we passes. Rest of their bunch seems to be one straight brand, 4W; so possibly Harris did buy 'em or own 'em.

WE REACHES the river that evenin' and Harris pitches camp on its south bank. I's most awful stiff and tired and sore from bein' tied to the saddle all day—wrists to the horn in front, feet hobbled under Tinhorn's belly, all with the same rawhide rope—and Harris ain't been considerate enough to feed me at noon, neither. He leaves one man on herd; and him, Claude and a great big eagle beaked walloper, jus' as hard as his pards, proceeds to lead my hoss to the bank of the river. It's runnin' 'bout an eighth of a mile wide, muddy water jus' a-swirlin' along with willers and some trees and lots of foam ridin' its crest. Makes a fella feel creepy and anything but nice and sociable even to look at it, 'specially with darkness just fallin'.

Harris comes to me and says slow and cold:

"Carm, if you want to swear to what I suggested this mornin' and go back to your camp, all right. You've cussed us fellas a heap, but we'll forget that."

"An' my tongue ain't tied now," I spits. "I s'pose you think you're goin' to scare the liver outa me by sayin' you'll plug me an' heave me in thar?"

"Nothin' as crude as that," returns Harris. "We's goin' to put both you and the hoss in the river, you tied to him. And don't get the idea through your head, fella, that we's bluffin'."

Bluffin'? 'Course they're bluffin'! What Harris says they'll do is too blamed cold blooded for anybody. I tells the lobo he dast do no such a damned thing, and the best thing he can do is cut that herd *pronto*, turn me loose and get the hell outa the country. That's the only compromise I'll consider.

"Why, doggone your ornery picture!" I bellers. "Any puncher what's worth a whoop'll go through hell an' high water for the brand he works for, an' you know it!"

" 'Hell an' high water'—that's good," opines Harris, and smiles a little cold, devilish smile. "You'll ride on the high water to hell, all right, Carm, 'less you—"

"'Nough of that blab!" I yammers. "I's laid down my hand, and you birds'll ride on plum' unhindered by me if you turns me loose an' cuts that herd."

"We hold aces ag'in' your bobtail, fella," returns Harris. "Cuttin' our herd is somethin' we don't intend doin' no time. And I reckon we'll travel on unhindered, too. I got a sneakin' admiration for guts or I wouldn't change words with you. 'Nough said."

"Yeh, plenty," I snorts; and by jiminy, Claude blindfolds Tinhorn with a gunny sack, and them three hydrophobia skunks fuzzes that poor hoss down the steep bank into the Rawah. As he hits into the water and a swirl catches him, Harris pulls his gun and sends a bullet into Tinhorn's head. That hoss rears and then flops on his side, and away him and me goes down the foamin' river.

His body rides the top like a raft; and I tell yuh, I sure is busy a-tryin' to keep my head above water, for I's stuck out there on the side of the pony like a limb on a log. And the water, so doggoned cold it's 'bout enough to finish a fella under any conditions, snarls—

"I want yuh!"

'Course Harris figgered by killin' Tinhorn he wouldn't have no chance to make either bank, and thus I's took care of proper; and for somethin' like a couple of hours and I don't know how many miles of hell and high water, it 'pears that he's figgered prezactly right. But the hoss continues to float; and though I's nigh drowned fifty times and nigh killed by trees and rocks and other things we hits fifty times more, I continues to live.

It pays to be tough as a pine knot sometimes, but I most certainly would 'a' cashed in my checks if them *hombres* hadn't overlooked jus' one little thing—

the rope what I was tied with. It takes a heck of a long while, with me a-strainin' at it all the time I ain't busy tryin' to breathe or clear my lungs o' water, afore that rawhide soaks enough to stretch. But stretch it finally does!

And when I makes it to shore I's so doggoned weak, sick, all in and froze that I jus' lies gaspin' and shiverin' for hours, it seems to me. But I realize I jus' gotta move or I sure will croak. My movements is awful, awful slow an' weak fust, but they's in the upstream direction towards Red Harris' camp. Presently some of my strength comes back. That's the advantage of havin' a constitution like a five year old Texas steer. Perhaps, too, that red hot on-the-prod warmth inside helps. Anyway, I's pretty nigh dry and real warm when I reaches the camp of the damn' thieves.

Fire's burned out. Two men's on night herd with the cattle. Not so good for me, without a weapon of no kind. 'Course they'd have to have two men on herd after pickin' up all them Key Hole cattle which, as near as I can make out in the dark, is givin' the night hawkers plenty to do.

I stalks the camp. Two saddled horses is picketed near by. The cook's asleep under the wagon and one of Harris' crew is in each of two beds lyin' close together near the wagon. The Rawah makes so much—to my ears cussed unpleasant—noise that I ain't apt to be heard.

I sneaks on the nearest bed, thinkin' I'll grab me a gun. And just as I reaches it, the tarp' and blankets is throwed back and Red Harris sets up facin' me. From that second on, things gets so danged hectic and all jumbled chaotic that I ain't certain jus' what happens.

I jumps for that walloper's frame and he rises to meet me. We collides like a couple of bulls, and outa the other bed bounds a man with a six-shooter. He can't use it for fear of hittin' the wrong man. The cook comes a-poppin' out from under the chuck wagon with a shotgun in his hands, and Red Harris yowls:

"Don't shoot! Stampede cattle! Help —get 'im! Help get 'im! Quick!"

Cookie and the other jigger don't wait for a second invitation. They comes at me like the runners-up in a pack of hounds when the lead dog has upset a coyote, and I heaves Red Harris over my shoulder into the Rawah jus' as they reaches me. My right foot trips cookie and he goes right on after his boss head fust into that boilin' river.

But I's right on the bank and that other gazoob is doin' his darndest to make me foller suit. A left to my chin and a right to my heart rocks me back, and I all but goes. Then I dodges the next wild swing, and the force of the blow as it misses carries my enemy off balance. I ducks and collects a double armful of his legs and lets loose of 'em as I heaves.

Three in the river! I leaps for cookie's shotgun and gets it as Harris' head appears coming up the bank. Somehow I can't help pullin' the trigger and lets Harris have the contents of one barrel right in the face. That's the last I ever sees of him.

SIMULTANEOUS with the report, I hears risin' above the Rawah's roar a thunder of hoofs soundin' from the south.

"Won't nobody cut that drove of cattle now," thinks I, spyin' for cookie and the other rattler. Their arms appears above the river bank before their heads does, and their voices sounds before any of the rest of their damp, cold carcasses shows up. Seems they's anxious to quit and call it a day.

Five minutes later I's got one of them hogtied and roped to a hind wheel of the wagon, and the other to a front wheel on the opposite side. Somehow I don't care how tight I pulls the ropes, neither. Then, collectin' all the six-shooters and heavin' the shotgun in the river, I swings on to one of the picketed broncs and takes after the cattle.

Claude and the eagle beaked walloper must be the ones with 'em, and they's stayed with 'em, too. I comes up on 'em about a mile and a half south of the river and they's got the herd millin'. It's

middlin' dark and Claude sings out:

"That you, Harris? What was the shot 'bout?"

I grunts, "Uh-huh," and spurs up to that cold eyed kid. Eagle Beak is way 'round on t'other side of the circlin' bunch. Claude is the most surprised, worst scairt bad egg you ever seen, when he sees who I is. His hat flies off, and I'll always swear it's his hair as raised it. He lets out one gosh awful screech and clutchin' his saddle horn, rips his hoss with his spurs and away he goes, headin' south like seven ghosts was after him 'stead of one.

B'jing, I lets him go. If I knows anything a-tall, nothing on earth'll ever induce that kid to ever come back. He's seen a ghost what he'll never forget.

Eagle Beak, hearin' the screech, comes spurrin' 'round the millin' cattle which has jus' about stopped.

"What in hell was that yell?" he shouts. "Where's—"

His words dies away in a gurgle and he looks everything except fierce as he raises his hands and looks not so much at the gun in my hand as at me.

When I's relieved him of his artillery and made sure he ain't totin' no other gun, we drives them cattle up to the bank of the Rawah, and holds 'em till daylight, Eagle Beak ridin' jus' a little in advance of me, by request. I thinks he's tellin' me the truth when, in answer to my questions, he lets me know that the herd, except for the Key Hole cattle they's picked up, belongs to a rancher up north about seventy-five miles. Harris and the others had been hired to bring 'em home for the rancher, but in crossin' the Ever Rollin' Hills Harris saw a way for himself and the boys with him to line their own pockets.

Eagle Beak swears they was led wrong by Harris and if I'll let 'em go—which same he's no hopes that I will—they'll deliver the dogies to their owner, and he swears by all the gods he knows they'll never try nothin' crooked again. This has been one fearful lesson to 'em, he says. Course I tells him what happened to Harris and had orter happen to all of 'em.

But and howsoever, at daybreak me and Eagle Beak rides to camp and puts cookie and the other jasper, who both is as meek and eager to please as he is, on hosses and goes out and cuts that herd of cattle. I's the only one as is carryin' any firearms, and I sure has plenty of them, so my helpers works real nice and enthusiastic. Uh-huh, they seems powerful desirous of pleasin'.

The Key Hole cattle goes stringin' back toward their home range; and the 4W bunch, with me directin' all operations, fords the river—chuck-wagon, hoss cavvy and all. The water had dropped considerable durin' the night, so they can make it all jake. I takes only the outfit what had belonged to Red Harris, to replace mine, and takes back only my own gun and belt, which fortunately Claude had traded to one of the others. Just before their wagon, which is the last thing to cross, pulls into the river, I throws all the other guns on it, and afoot I stands on the bank, watchin' that leaderless layout out of sight.

You see, I didn't want one of their hosses for fear I might get in trouble about it later—not from any of them, for I's dead certain they'll never bother me again, but from the rightful owner. Fella name of Floyd Stallings. Do yuh know him, Mr. Keys? You do, eh? Then I guess I done all jake . . .

Eh? What's that? You're agoin' to tell the waddies at the ranch about this, and you're agoin' to name me "Old Hell and High Water Carm"? Well, I guess that'll be all jake too.

When starvation faced the Indians of the North and

Caribou Coming!

By A. DeHERRIES SMITH

"DON'T like this trip. Too darned near the freeze up to suit me," Sergeant Blair grumbled, narrowed eyes ranging out beyond the schooner's deck to where the Great Slave Lake's icy waters lapped red cliffs.

"Enh-enh," Constable Corrigan grunted in reply. "Was there any cows shassayin' around here a guy could make his fortune with ice cream; cost nothin' to freeze the stuff. Ho-hum! This old barge'll never win the America's cup. She's a moose cat at goin' backwards."

The sergeant nodded in mute agreement. His gaze went aloft to the flapping canvas, then back to the desolate shore line.

"Hanged if I can figure out why there should be any trouble with the Indians at the Killing Place," he mumbled, half to himself. "All the Yellowknives have to do is to go out and shoot the caribou until they're sick of it. Why, with the way the deer herds pour through the pass even the old men can lay up enough meat in a few days to keep their teepees going all winter. Can't make out what the racket is."

"Me neither."

The constable sighed, throwing the wheel over to catch a puff of wind that momentarily stirred the lake's glassy surface.

"These apes here seem to think some one is tryin' to do 'em dirt though."

Corrigan waved a contemptuous moccasin at the deerskin clad figures huddled

down in the patrol boat's cockpit.

"Well, Mike, we've got to look into the thing, whatever it is," the sergeant said, decision in his low voice. "Our job is to see that the tribes are fixed up with caribou meat for the winter and we're going to do it. Guess I'll go below and look over the engine. If the wind drops off any more we'll have to use the old tin can."

"Detroit to the rescue, all right," Corrigan called, as the other man's long body swung down out of view. "Stand by to go about!" he roared, chuckling to himself at the startled expressions on the natives' faces. "'Bout ship! Hot mama! Away she rambles I don't think."

The three tattered Indians gazed in mute bewilderment at the stocky figure grasping the Mounted Police schooner's wheel. Assuredly the redcoat was mad. Enh-enh. But of a pleasing madness. Had he not given strange foods in little iron boxes? *Mewassin* . . .

Constable Corrigan ducked his red head as the boom swung across the deck. He glanced back over one shoulder at the bleak north shore, took his direction from under the clattering mainsail, shuffled his moccasins in a brief dance and then addressed the staring Indians.

"You bozos are lucky an' you don't know it. Nothin' to do but toddle all over takin' pot shots at caribou an' dancin' around the camp-fires yellin', 'Ki-yi! Ki-yi!'. Now look at me, will ya? Did the inspector cop me navigatin' this ship with me hat off an'—bingo!—on the mat! Take my tip, never join the police, you cockeyed loafers. Down on the prairies you're cavalry; north of Athabasca, dog punchers; up here, sailors. Who ever heard tell of a ship's captain wearin' spurs? Makes you laugh don't it, old bottle nose? Well, well, you're agreeable jiggers, if profound ignoramuses. Try whistlin' for wind 'cause there ain't none in this darned country of yours. 'Bout ship again is the motto. Hey, below there! Hey! Sergeant, dear!"

The constable's voice tapered off into a long noted call that brought Blair's bronzed face to the cabin coaming.

Corrigan waved an emphatic hand to the slapping canvas. The sergeant vaulted out of the cabin, stepped over the Indians and strode aft to the wheel. He towered over the other man as he stared aloft. The snow lines about his gray eyes puckered up into little ridges of concern.

"No use trying it any more, Mike," Blair's crisp voice ordered. "Got to make speed or we'll be in the devil of a nice jam. Look there to the east."

Corrigan brought the schooner's bow up into the riffle of wind and, with the patrol boat's sails quivering idly, followed the pointing finger. Blue black clouds were mounting in the clear sky, against them high flying wedges of geese honking their way south to warmer climes. Ducks were gathering in quacking bands beneath the shelter of the cliffs; already the willows hanging to the rock faces were bare and brown; the stunted spruce trees appeared to be shriveled as if expecting the blasts that would soon hurtle down out of the Arctic.

"Old Man Winter comin' kihootin' right along," the constable agreed, pulling up his parki hood to shut off the chilly air. "That's snow. We'll have the freeze up *pronto*. What now?"

The younger man ran thoughtful fingers through his fair hair. He was still staring at the desolate coast.

"Got to move," he said suddenly. "Must finish this patrol or we'll be in Dutch. Darn the Yellowknives, the Dogribs and all the rest of them! That's a bad sky. However, we've got to land these nitchies and make sure that the gang at old Fort Reliance is all right for the winter. Strip the sticks and we'll burn up some of the government's precious gasoline. See, there's a flock of golden plover headed south too. Going to be an early winter. Hustle it, Mike."

Blocks creaked, ropes whined, billows of canvas cluttered the deck in response to the order. Blair leaped below, overhauled and started the engine, and then vaulted back to the deck again. *Put-put-put-put-put* the *Fitzgerald's* engine boomed

back from the basalt cliffs in reverberating echoes, as the sergeant held the little vessel on toward the head of the lake, while Corrigan stowed the canvas and cleared up the deck litter.

HALF an hour later thin columns of smoke were seen ebbing up from a score of teepees set on a little flat at the mouth of a nameless river flowing in from the north. The Indians jumped to their feet pointing at the smokes, grinning their delight at one another.

"*Tana anima meskana ni ka?*" the sergeant asked.

Immediately there was a flourishing of arms and dirty fingers pointing to all points of the compass.

"Hopeless outfit! They've got no more idea of the channel than I have," Blair muttered disgustedly to the other man. "Darned if I'm going to take the schooner in there! Throw the birchbark over and shoot them ashore. Make it snappy, too, Mike; I don't like that sky."

"Not by a damn sight!" Corrigan advised the Indians when the four had finally shoved off from the schooner. "You'd like to squat there an' watch me paddlin' you home to your squaws, eh? You're full of hops! Here, you rabbit face, grab that paddle! You too, bottle nose. Attaboy! Now go to it. Give way there. Let the squaws see a little of the navy style. Row, brothers, row—and don't splash so doggone much. What the heck do you think you are, anyhow? Mack Sennett's bathing beauties, eh?"

Blair paced the schooner's limited after deck with impatient strides.

"Darn him," the sergeant growled, eyes ranging to where Corrigan's thick figure was visible on the narrow beach, circled by a ring of Indians. "Curse the Yellowknives and their caribou hunt, anyhow! Got to risk being caught in the ice every year just to make sure those boobs don't miss the deer migration. Well, I suppose it's better to see that they have plenty of meat than to be chasing all over the Barrens later on with emergency rations. What the blazes is keeping that man? About time, too."

The birchbark was pushing off. The faint yelping of huskies sounded over the water, and thin shouts from the women. There was much waving of hands before Corrigan turned and shot the little vessel across the gleaming water with deeply driven strokes.

"Some nifty lookin' janes in that outfit," the constable panted as the two men lifted the birchbark aboard the schooner. "Guess I'll amble along here for my Christmas holidays if—"

"Dry up!" the sergeant ordered curtly. "Get the engine started. That long point there is at the mouth of the Lockhart. We'll be at Reliance in an hour. Stay below and watch the motor. There's a bit of knock somewhere and we can't afford to take any chances of a breakdown."

"Act Two of 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Jiggs': Well an' favorably known constable transposes himself from ship's captain into engineer an' cook," Corrigan threw over his shoulder as he slid into the cabin. "What a life! Wish I could get me a job rolling barrels in a brewery. Boy, there's the real—"

The sputtering of the patrol boat's engine cut off his words and once more the *Fitzgerald* was creeping along under the stark brown cliffs, circled by the peering, sweeping gulls. Blair's eyes ranged the little vessel in mute disgust; his fingers itched to restow the canvas that flopped over the booms as a result of Mike's careless seamanship. Despite a summer of eternal patrolling the sergeant's khaki service uniform was still neat, though stained. He was naturally particular and the disorder of ropes and canvas irked him.

"Bacon and, or just bacon?" Corrigan's voice queried as his red head was thrust out of the companionway.

"Just about in, Mike," Blair answered, sweeping the forlorn coast with his eyes again. "No beans. Take too long. Make it bacon and hardtack. Look, there's the five stone chimneys. You've got to hustle."

The constable twisted his freckled face about to where the towering shapes of the old fort's smoke conductors stood out against a low cover of wind twisted spruce woods. He disappeared and a moment later the appetizing odor of sizzling bacon was mixed with the smell of burnt gasoline and fish that clung to the little cabin's walls.

Blair put the helm over and steered directly for the post. Fort Reliance was always of unfailing interest to him, one of the few links with the distant past. As the schooner drove forward the Mountie went over the fort's history again in his mind. Built by one of Sir John Franklin's parties while searching for the North-West Passage in 1825, the place had once boasted a series of huge, barrack-like buildings. It had rung to naval orders, had seen strange sights.

Back, the explorer, had wintered here in 1833-34; still later other explorers and government engineers had used the solidly constructed fort. Then came the fur traders. Careless hands had supplied the necessary spark and now nothing remained of its former glory but those five huge monuments of boulders and clay that had withstood the winds and ice of half a dozen decades.

Hans Schragge, the present trader, had used his native cunning in utilizing these monuments to past exploits. He had built his trading post about one of the huge pillars, and report said no one had ever frozen in his establishment. Schragge was able to take care of himself, the sergeant reflected, as the schooner surged in toward the low spit on which the old post was built.

"SUFFERING Pete! What's this?" Corrigan queried when he made fast the *Fitzgerald's* shore line and came upright, blue eyes twinkling. "Ain't got the caribou herds right in the post have they?"

"Well, wouldn't that give you a pain, Mike," the sergeant said wearily. "These Yellowknives haven't got as much brains each as the average ten year old kid on the outside. Whanging away all their shells like that! We've got to stop this racket or we'll be driving dogs all winter, feeding the idiots. Got your revolver? Right. At the double."

The narrow bay rang with the cracking of Winchesters—single shots and salvoes that brought thundering echoes from the cliffs across the inlet. Followed by Corrigan, the sergeant ran up the beach, picking his way between the birchbark canoes that littered the shingle. Furtive huskies, patently terrified by the noise, slunk through the willow bushes, wolf ears flickering to the rifle shots. The dogs even neglected their usual futile sport of leaping up at the split whitefish and inconnu on the drying racks, hanging like so many multicolored ties in some draper's window, smelling to high heaven.

Blair reached the beach crest to vision Schragge's huddle of log buildings, the five gaunt chimneys, two score or more of light brown teepees clustered about the cabins and a pushing jumble of native figures. The women were dressed as usual in long skirts and the North's flaming shawls, the men clad in ill fitting store clothes. Each brave's tousled head was crowned by one of the jaunty, gold laced naval caps for which the Lone Land native yearns.

"Boys doin' the William Tell act?" Corrigan's panting voice hazarded.

Blair took no notice of the words, his heedless moccasins swishing through the low alder and willow scrub, eyes on the yelling jumble of figures ahead.

The arrival of the khaki tunicked figures brought instant quiet to the Indians. As befitted their station, the women fled behind the crowd with flapping black skirts to which bedraggled children clung. The men turned to stare at the Mountie, their naval caps cocked jauntily, their store trousers, fastened by the North's flaming waist scarfs, sagging down over gaily embroidered moccasins. One man raised his rifle, but it was struck down by an elderly native, apparently a tribal leader.

"What the deuce is going on here?" the

sergeant called, thrusting his way through the crowd to where a white man and a half-breed stood, their hands loaded with the trumpery gee-gaws that delight the northland natives—strings of beads, five cent jewelry, silk handkerchiefs of alarming colors.

"Hello there, Blair. Whatcha gettin' all roiled up over? Just havin' some sport," Schragge replied evenly, waving one loaded fist to the rifles in the natives' hands.

The sergeant's eyes were narrowed as they went over the trader to his thin smiling face, to the flickering brown orbs, never at rest for a moment, to the gold laced cap and waist scarf by which the man endeavored to betoken that he was one with the dwellers of the Barren Lands.

"Say, was you down in the celluloid country they'd just make you accept five thousand a week for actin' the innocent flapper alone in Noo Yawk," Corrigan said to Schragge, one great hand patting the trader's narrow shoulders. "Bet the leering villain would plant a wicked kiss on your shrinkin' lips, provided you wasn't chewin'."

"Look, Hans, you know darned well this is not right," the sergeant growled, ignoring the constable. "The winter is coming and, if these nitchies haven't got shells to lay in a stock of meat when the caribou migration crosses the Lockhart pass, they'll starve to death. You know that."

Blair's eyes strayed away to the river's cliff walled mouth. There in a few weeks, perhaps a few days, the millions of caribou would be passing through the Killing Place on their way to the Strong Woods from the Arctic coast. The deer would follow the same valley in which for generations the Yellowknives had laid in their winter meat supply.

As he stared, a picture crossed the Mountie's vision. Indians crouched behind the stone shooting shelters with empty rifles, watching the deer pass—day after day, week after week. Then would come the eight months' winter, and famished children crying in the teepees. No, by the Lord Harry! He'd have to make them quit this foolishness.

"I ain't stoppin' the nitchies shootin' all the caribou they want, am I?" Schragge queried, voice indignant as the sergeant turned back to stare at the trader, level eyed. "They got plenty of shells. Cripes, there's little enough amusement in this country without you guys buttin' in."

The Mountie let the insult pass. This was no time for picking foolish quarrels. He was still watching the other man's ever darting eyes. Finally Blair said:

"But you're giving them prizes for shooting. What are you encouraging them to waste ammunition for?"

Schragge shrugged his narrow shoulders humorously, still smiling.

"Free country, ain't it?" he queried. "Got to keep 'em good natured; that's the fur trade. Anyhow, Blair, you can't do nothin' an' you knows it. I ain't a-breakin' no laws, so you lay off me, see?"

"I'll give him a poke in the jaw, eh?" Mike suggested softly, when the trader turned away, saying something in a low tone to his half-breed assistant.

Steel muscled fingers gripped the constable's arm, emphasizing that this was no season for strong arm tactics. Blair thought for a moment in silence, then called to the huddle of Indians—

"*Tan ateyun?*"

Instantly every head was turned.

"Behold, I am of the King's Men" the sergeant threw out in Cree. "We of the Redcoats do not come seeking your white fox and marten skins. We come to keep the law, to see that the people of the Land of Little Sticks have fat bellies when the *windigo* howls over the ridges."

"Enh-enh."

A chorus of grunts answered the Mountie. The natives stopped shuffling. Now there were no sounds but an occasional yelp from a huskie, the distant calling of the sea gulls. This was going to be a powwow. *Mewassin*, it was good!

"You are but as little children crawling about the teepees," the sergeant went on scornfully.

Every eye was focused on his tall frame, long hair hanging over bronzed cheekbones as the men leaned forward with ears strained. "Now you shoot all your shells. Behold the deer come and you sit like old squaws about the cooking fires. Then the long dark, and you live as foxes, taking what the gray wolves leave. Are you strong hunters or women? I have spoken."

A long silence, then low hissing as the Indians discussed the matter after their own roundabout way.

WHAM! A sudden shot fractured the stillness, and every man wheeled to where Batiste Garrou, the trader's assistant, was preparing to fire again at a framework of willow sticks over which a caribou hide had been stretched.

"*Edthun! Edthun!* The deer! The deer!" one of the hunters shrieked excitedly in Chipewyan. The man thrust his way through the press of natives, threw up his Winchester and let drive at the skin target.

"*Lezony!* Good! Good!" Schragge clucked in the same tongue as he handed the grinning Chipewyan a yellow tassel.

The hunter lost no time in attaching this prize to his cap, glancing over to where the bright eyed young squaws beamed admiration.

Laughs came from the other natives. Hands patted the man's shoulders under the sagging "trade" shirt. Others pointed to a neat circle drilled over the target's heart, to which a boy was racing, intending to plug up the hole with moss. All at once a babel of talk broke out; the natives commenced elbowing one another aside, anxious to demonstrate their skill as marksmen.

Blair's face was strained when he turned to the constable. Mike shrugged his heavy shoulders, motioning with his fist.

"No, we're in the police, remember," the sergeant growled. "Can't do a thing. Schragge is right; he's within the law. But I'm going to stick around even if it means letting the schooner freeze in here. Guess we'll go aboard. This fur trade is a sweet business, eh? Come on."

Schragge nudged Garrou when the two Mounties turned and started back for the patrol boat.

"Here's one time we're puttin' it over those buttinski guys, Batiste," the trader laughed, little pig eyes almost disappearing, "but the worst is yet to come, only they don't know it, eh?"

The half-breed's thin stream of French blood had brought with it a discernment that tempered the sluggish Yellowknife strain. He voiced a thin cackle of understanding laughter.

ONLY dusk brought a cessation of the natives' rifle firing. Quiet at length settled down on Fort Reliance. Cooking fires outside the teepees stabbed the night's curtain with red glows, about which the hunters squatted on their heels, boasting of their marksmanship, while the squaws toasted rabbits and fish over the embers on long willow sticks.

The two Mounties sat on the *Fitzgerald's* after deckhouse, garbed in drill parkis against the night's chill. Blair smoked pipe after pipe in silence, eyes on the yellow gleam from Schragge's dirty window, ears filled with the rumble of voices about the fires.

Half an hour later Corrigan's hand suddenly thudded the other man's ribs.

"Hey!" the constable shouted. "Look at that, will you? Indians working! The end of the world must be coming."

"I'm watching them," Blair said grimly. "They're packing firewood for a big fire. I guess Schragge is going to play the fairy godfather to the limit. A dance. We'll go up as soon as they start."

Tum-tum-tum—tum!

The booming of a dancing drum welled out on the frosty air, when the fire's glow lighted up the open space about the fort. There was an immediate howling answer from the prowling huskies and a chorus of expectant yelps from the natives.

"Come on," the sergeant ordered. "Still packing that gun? Right."

Trailed by the curious dogs they padded up to where the fire was leaping skyward, illuminating the peaked shapes of

the lodges, transforming the old fort's chimneys into graceful minarets.

All at once the sergeant's eyes narrowed. He nudged Corrigan, whispering—

"Say, look over there by those old squaws with the drums. No—more to the right. Yes. White men, eh?"

"By gosh, that's so!" the other man grunted when the flickering light fell on the two faces for a moment. "Now where the devil did they blow in from. There's no schooner up this far now; they were all pullin' out for the winter when we left Fort Resolution. No canoes came in today either. Must be a couple of angels that slid over the edge of a cloud."

"Those two birds are Mounce and Quist," Blair's low tones sounded. "Two tough lads, if you ask me. There's something on or they wouldn't be here. We've got to watch them pretty close, Mike."

The constable replied by patting the revolver holster under his parki skirt as he said:

"Schragge must be staging a real show. Look there. Puttin' on the caribou dance."

"That means an all night session," the sergeant grumbled, eyes on the natives. "Yes, there they go, tying the horns to their heads, the poor fools."

The two Mounties watched the dancers in somber silence, when the men with the horns attached to their foreheads capered about the big fire in imitation of deer; making sudden lunges at the audience, to the sound of cackling laughter.

The dancers' droning chant came distinctly above the low rumbling of the drums:

"Deer, you are the one that fills our bellies with fat meat; therefore I will sing and dance in your honor tonight. *Ne ka nanutuwalemikwuk numawela maka ne ka miskakwuk!*"

The two capering figures circled the fire, swaying right and left, their repeated song being answered by a loud chorus of "*Hoi! Hoi! Hoi!*" accompanied by a thunderous banging on the drums.

"Those tom-toms play the deuce with the Indians," the sergeant growled. "Seems as if that infernal thrumming gets right into their blood; it's like a drug. Here's another couple. Oh Lord, we're going to get a real dose of it!"

"Deer, you are the one from whose sinews the strong snowshoes are made; therefore I will dance and sing in your honor tonight," came the clucking chant to be answered by another ringing "*Hoi! Hoi! Hoi!*"

The antlered heads stood out in silhouette against the stretched skins of the teepees. More wood was thrown on the fire. It blazed up, outlining the cluster of poles at the lodges' smoke vents, turning the scattered trees into a delicate tracery against the clear sky. Hour after hour passed, filled with the drums' frantic thudding, the wilder shouts of the Indians as the night wore on.

"HOLY CATS! What's that?" Corrigan catapulted to his feet when a terrific fusillade of shots suddenly drowned the natives' clatter. Flames leaped up from behind Schragge's post in time with an inferno of bangs and the whistling of bullets. Yelps of dismay came from the circle of squatting natives. There was an immediate cessation of the dance as the Yellowknives fled helter-skelter over the rocks, seeking shelter.

With the first explosion, the sergeant threw himself flat, dragging the other man with him. They lay there motionless, listening to the blasts and the *whee—ee-e* of the bullets whistling about in all directions.

"It's the magazine! The magazine!" Schragge's yelp of dismay sounded when finally the explosions ceased. "Some shiftless fool of a nitchie set fire to the magazine. Now the whole works'll starve; not another shell nearer than Resolution. By crimminy, but I'll make them pay dear for this!"

"Hey, you Schragge!" the sergeant called across. "Were all your shells in that cabin?"

The trader's thin face had lost its cus-

tomary smile, when he turned in the firelight's glow and stared across at the two figures approaching through the gloom.

"That you, Blair? Yep, every damn shell gone up. Thousand dollars' worth of .30-30 ammunition in that there cabin an' now—"

"Sounded like a pretty small war for a thousand dollars," Blair cut in, voice acid. "Got any in the post?"

"In the post? No, I ain't crazy enough for that yet," the other replied. "And the cursed Indians fired off every danged shell they had I guess. I'll be feedin' the brutes this winter."

"I have a picture of you doing that," Blake grunted. "You can't do anything with that fire now. I want you—"

At the words Schragge edged backward, but came erect again with a sigh of relief when the Mountie went on:

"—to go into the post with me. I'm going to go through it. If you have any shells the Indians are going to get them. You'd better watch your step. Dry up, and shove ahead!"

But Schragge had not lied. With Corrigan assisting him, Blair turned the post's trading room upside down. There was an abundance of traps, red flannel, tomato sauce, lemon extract, fish hooks and canned fruits, but no ammunition.

"What did I tell you, eh?" Schragge's voice was triumphant. "You think all us traders is the bunk, eh? Pity you guys wouldn't do a little work yourselves an' then you might know how hard it is to make a decent livin' up here."

The sergeant stared hard at the narrow face, without making any reply. He turned on his heel and padded out, followed by the constable.

Excited yelling from the teepees brought Schragge and Batiste rushing to the post's door on the Mounties' heels. The four stood there watching the leaping figures near the fire, listening to the reverberating yells of:

"*Edthun! Edthun!* The caribou! The caribou!"

"Crimminy!" came from Schragge in awed tones. "That's old Mowaspun's boy. He was watchin' at the pass. Cripes! The deer migration is comin' an' we ain't got a shell! Fifteen years in the North an' now I'm broke all through one measly Indian—"

"Who cares whether you're broke or not?" Blair flared up, wheeling about and glaring down at the trader. "What does that matter? I'm thinking of those poor fools of Indians with empty guns, and the deer passing. Good Lord! Mike, this means a fast trip to Fort Resolution and back for us—ice or no ice."

The sergeant turned his back on the messenger's running figure.

"Every nitchie north of the Snowdrift will starve to death this winter if they don't get ammunition. I hate to chance the old *Fitz* so late in the year. No help for it though. There'll be a moon soon; we'll try it."

The boy had left the clacking group at the fire and was running toward the post, still yelling:

"*Edthun! Edthun!*"

Neither of the Mounties took any notice of him. Their thoughts were on the long trip back across the Great Slave, through narrow passages filled with uncharted rock islands—and the geese were going south!

Schragge watched the peaked Stetson hats disappear in the gloom. He banged the door in the astonished messenger's face and, with one arm about Garrou's leathery neck, rocked to and fro in silent merriment.

Outside, the boy shrilled:

"*Edthun! Edthun!*"

He was expectant of his reward. The trader took no notice of the fists thudding on the door.

"How's that for brains, Batiste?" Schragge chuckled. "The caribou comin' an' the yalla legged guys beatin' it! Say, it was well worth while burnin' up them few cases of shells. By cripes it did the trick. Go find Mounce. Tell him to come here a-whoopin'."

Followed by the ever curious huskies the two Mounties walked in glum silence down through the rustling willows to

where the *Fitzgerald* bulked dimly white against cliffs across the bay.

NEITHER man spoke. Without orders Corrigan threw off the shore lines and poled the patrol boat clear of the beach. Blair was below in the combined cabin and engine room, and presently at a yell of "All clear!" from the constable, the engine's *put-put-put-put* filled the land locked waters with volleys of sound.

"Give me the wheel, Mike," Blair ordered, as his head appeared above the companionway. "Almost too dark for a lookout, but you'd better try it in the bows. I'll drive her along slowly and you listen for the sound of water on rocks. Once we get out of this bay I think it'll be better—more room anyhow."

Corrigan grunted something that the sergeant could not catch, but a few moments later whistling sounded from forward. The winking light in Schragge's post was fading astern; now the teepees were engulfed in the shadows cast by the scrawny woods behind the post. Excited Indian shouts welled out on the night's calm as the *Fitzgerald* rounded the long point masking the Lockhart's mouth and stood out to sea.

Half an hour later a shout from the wheel brought Corrigan stumbling aft over the litter of ropes and sails.

"Look, Mike," Blair announced as soon as the other man reached him. "You know that camp where we landed the three nitchies on the way up? Well, I'm going off there. We'll anchor the boat and I'll go ashore in the canoe."

"I knew it! I knew it!" the constable mourned. "A dirty army trick! Here I blows off about the nifty flappers on the beach an' because you has three stripes you—"

"Look, Mike, this is no time for foolery," Blair broke in. "I'm going to get shells somehow. Those Norwegian trappers over on Pethei might have some. Old Nazak is ashore there and he generally knows what's what. Beat it for'ard now and keep your eyes skinned. There should be a faint light showing through the lodge walls from the fires. I'm depending on you. Go ahead!"

Silence settled down again on the little schooner as she forged forward over the glassy water, hemmed in by the Great Slave's barren rock walls.

DAWN'S fingers were touching the Barren Lands' ridges with pale light when the grimy sided *Malamute* chugged her way across the bay. The schooner's passage sent the resting geese spiraling up into the thin air with honks of alarm, brought a howling chorus of yelps from the watchful huskies.

Quist steered the vessel in with the careless care of the northern lake navigator. The sound of the schooner's engine brought a figure racing down from the post. The navigator was greeted by Schragge, who stood on a reddish granite boulder, waving one arm to the northeast.

At Quist's yell the thrumming engine ceased. Mounce's deerskin clad shoulders appeared out of the cabin, and the three men stared toward the mouth of the Lockhart following Schragge's finger. From the valley crest puffballs of smoke bobbed up into the chilly morning air, until flattened out by the Barrens' ever present wind.

"See it?" Schragge yelled to the men on the schooner, though he could have tossed a pebble aboard. "Caribou coming! Caribou coming! You knows the smoke talk as well as me. The head of the deer migration is crossin' the Killin' Place!"

"It takes you, Hans," Quist mumbled, admiration in his voice. "We'll sure make a haul this time. Them nitchies is goin' to pay for the shells all right. I'll say so."

Mounce echoed the other man's laugh, pointing to the cabin.

"Yep. Pass over the cases," Schragge ordered. "Here's Batiste now. You three get the shells up to the post whilst I goes an' gives the Yellowknives a powwow. They're pretty sulky but I'll fix it. Let the .22 shells be; we wants the .30-30 stuff first. All right."

The trader turned and made his way up toward where little knots of figures

were gathered outside the teepees, some gazing down at the schooner, others with their eyes fixed on the age old signal that told of their winter's meat in the passing.

"*Edthun! Edthun!*" Schragge called cheerily to the figures crouching over the teepee fires. "Now the hunters will show their skill. Mewassin, this is good. Come quickly to the post and I will make the debt."

As indicative of his great good humor, the trader tossed handfuls of the cheap fur trade candy to the almond eyed children, patting the men on the backs, playfully rumpling the squaws' tousled hair under the flaming head shawls.

The older Indians still squatted over the fires, heedless of the trader's offer, eyes on the three men trotting back and forth from the schooner, laden with the heavy ammunition boxes. The caribou were coming and there were shells, but—

Impatient of the delay and anxious to exhibit their *sang froid* under the peering eyes of the girls, some of the younger men got to their feet. Having tilted the naval caps to jaunty angles, they strode with easy nonchalance toward the post, into which Schragge was now disappearing.

This was the debt making. What did it matter if the price were large? It would be many sleeps before the accounting came—perhaps they might trap some silver foxes? They were strong hunters, not old men that babbled like squaws.

After the custom of the trade the hunters would be outfitted by Schragge in preparation for the trapping season, each man receiving goods to the value of his estimated fur catching ability. The debt would be signed for with the Indian's mark. Thus the trader was assured of the hunter's catch, and so from year to year the native lived in a carefree, paternal bondage.

Gradually the post filled with the younger men. Soon the aromatic odors of cinnamon, cloves and fancy soaps were blotted out by the tang of smoke cured deerskins. The acrid odor of fish tainted clothing and unwashed bodies rapidly overcame the other smells, when more and more Indians crowded into the post, shoving and jostling in sudden eagerness.

"Lay off that packin'," Schragge ordered the half-breed in English when Batiste thrust his way through the crowd with another two cases of .30-30 shells. "We got 'em goin'; the old men will be here after a spell. The young bucks is crazy to get the shells and beat it off to paste the caribou."

The trader reached behind him to where a heavily bound volume lay on one of the shelves. He jerked the book down on the counter, glanced at the name heading the list and roared in Cree—

"Yayanam, son of Wabisiw!"

"*Ota! Ota!*" the Indian called eagerly.

The man forced a passage forward, eyes alight, followed by admiring glances from the other heedless bucks.

Schragge grinned covertly at Batiste. The half-breed interpreted the glance. The Indians were thrilling with the blood lust of their ancestors, were willing to pay any price that the trader demanded for his goods. Nothing mattered now but that they reach the milling herds of caribou and kill—kill—kill.

"You are a strong hunter," Schragge mouthed, flattery in his voice. "You will need a long knife for the skinning of many deer. Heeyah! A big knife."

He flung a sheath knife clattering on the counter, mumbling, "two muskrat," as he entered the item in the book, marking "$3" opposite the entry.

"*Enh-enh!*"

This was a fair debt Yayanam sensed from the grunts of approval that came from his comrades thrusting down on him.

Schragge's quick eyes went out over the tasseled shoulders and tousled black heads. He nudged Batiste. Some of the older hunters were trickling into the post, standing by the door in uncertainty. Hot stuff! He had 'em going!

Beans, flour, beads for his squaw, blankets, a camp ax, tea and other necessities were added to Yayanam's mounting pile of goods, in tune with the scratching of Schragge's pen and the monotonous—

"One skin, two skins, eight skins."

"Bust that case of shells an' gimme a box," the trader said low toned to Batiste, when he finally estimated that the Indian had been given about the quantity of goods that would balance his fur catch.

Schragge's slim fingers jerked out one of the nickel pointed .30-30 shells, and set it upright on the counter.

"One skin," he announced casually.

Yayanam thrust out a yellow hand, only to draw it back again.

"One shell—one skin! *Namoya*!" the man muttered in Cree. He stared into Schragge's eyes, turning to gaze in perplexity at the other natives.

"*Namoya! Namoya!*"

A chorus of clucking negative grunts came from the other hunters. Behold, this was evil. Was not the debt one skin for one *box* of shells? Had it not been thus for many sleeps? But now the trader said, "One shell—one skin". That was bad—very bad!

SCHRAGGE sensed that the crisis had arrived. He filled his lungs and called—

"Listen well to this talk, O you people of the Land of Little Sticks."

Dead silence at once came to the crowding Indians; not even a moccasin shuffled. The trader explained forcefully that these were the only shells on the north shore, that there would be empty cooking pots in the teepees unless they were taken on the debt.

He went on to illustrate that these particular shells were brought to Fort Reliance at great expense, that were it not for his fatherly instincts there would be wailing in the lodges, when the white winds swept down over the Barrens.

A pause came when Schragge ceased talking. Whites of eyes rolled in the low trading post's gloom. The Indians hissed back and forth, voicing their dismay, well knowing that at this price, there would be no skins left for the purchase of food for the summer's happy loafing.

But none of the hunters gave any indication of leaving the building. The natives' minds were filled with thoughts of the deer crowding down to the Killing Place—a meat eater's Paradise. They were weakening, the trader's cunning brain told him. Schragge picked up the shell, thudded it on the counter and announced with finality in his voice—

"One shell—one skin!"

Yayanam laughed all at once, waving a boastful hand.

"It is a good talk," he called. "Behold when the snow goes I will be a rich man with many white fox skins. What is a handful of shells to a great hunter? *Namoya!* I take the debt."

Schragge kicked Batiste under the counter with his moccasin, dipped his pen and wrote in the ledger at the bottom of Yayanam's account: One .30-30 shell—1 muskrat skin . . . $1.50.

Pen between his teeth, the trader counted over a score of boxes, figured the entire sum on a handy tea package and prepared to enter the total.

In that moment the pen was jerked from Schragge's hand and the record book torn away from under his elbow.

In an uncomprehending daze the trader watched brown fingers gripping the pen as the words "One .30-30 shell" were savagely lined out, and above it written in a bold scrawl: *One box* .30-30 shells. The words "One box" were thickly underlined.

The trader's narrowed eyes slowly raised from the Indian's dirty deerskin capote to a brown face, out of which two gray eyes flamed. Above them the tattered fur of a minkskin cap almost met the snow wrinkles puckered up about those baleful orbs in hard little ridges.

"You cur! Soaking these poor devils one-fifty for a shell!"

Sergeant Blair's voice came distinct and low through the excited gabbling behind, the shuffling of moccasins and rubbing of deerskins when the Indians strained forward.

Schragge's drooping lips suddenly became firm, the narrow eyes ceased their flickering. With a doglike yelp the trader ducked out of sight.

His head had no more than disappeared, when the Mountie vaulted the counter, one hand under his dirty capote. A revolver barrel thugged on Batiste's outthrust arms as the breed hastily leaped away from this white faced fury. Schragge came erect when the other man darted past him, shocked into immobility by the muzzle thrusting into the small of his back.

"Drop that gun and kick it back under the counter!" Blair's hard voice ordered. "Right," he added when the revolver thudded to the board floor and was shoved out of sight by Schragge's moccasin.

"You'll pay for this!" the trader's thin voice whined at length. "I got a drag down East. You'll hear about—"

"Quit!" the sergeant growled acidly. "Schragge, your wings are flapping on the brink of hell! I'll send you there without batting an eyelid if you make one break. You too, Garrou. Don't move."

Blair stepped back quickly from the two men, peering out through the dirty window set in the thick log walls. As he did so, a momentary expression of anxiety crossed his lean face. Three figures were outlined against the wide waters of the bay—Quist, Mounce and an Indian in flapping deerskins, who gesticulated with his arms toward the post.

Hurried words passed between the two traders. They put down the ammunition cases they were carrying and set out for the cabin at a run.

Schragge's darting eyes had noted the expression on the Mountie's face. He half turned away, pouring a torrent of clucking Cree at the shuffling Indians.

"*Namoya! Namoya!*" Blair called to the natives in protest.

With a deft flip he jerked the stinking capote over his head. There came wheezing gasps of astonishment from the Indians when their widened eyes glimpsed a khaki uniform, flecked by glittering buttons—a long breathless pause while the Yellowknives gazed mutely from the trader to the Mountie and back again.

Wham! Wham! All at once the sergeant darted about to send two shots crashing out through the window. Yells from the Indians answered the reports. Schragge straightened out of his crouch when the blued muzzle of the Webley swung back to him, behind it two cold gray eyes.

"Enter the young an' handsome hero!" Corrigan's carefree tones came from the door, as his thick frame darkened the entrance. "Was I down in Hollywood—"

"Good man!" Blair's relieved tones sounded. "About turn, Mike! Quick! The other two are coming . . . "

A revolver's bark and astonished yelps cut off the words. The sergeant glanced out of the shattered window, saw the two men halt, turn about and elevate their hands. He glimpsed Corrigan's hat come off with a sweeping gesture of refined courtesy. Blair laughed and wheeled back.

"Lord, those things hum," the Mountie grunted disgustedly, as he kicked the deerskin away. "Still they served their purpose very well. Had a nice little ramble over the rocks from Nazak's camp last night, Schragge. You overdid the dramatic stuff, and I played a hunch. Well, let that go. Line those Indians up and give them each five boxes of shells. Note the word—give! A seasonable gift from Santa Claus Schragge!"

"How come, give? Say, look here—"

"Enough said!" The Mountie halted him. "You'll give each nitchie five boxes of shells, and let them get away to the Killing Place. When they knock down enough meat, you'll fix the debt. Then we'll close the post, because I'm taking you back to Fort Resolution with me. In a hurry, too. Don't want to get caught here by the ice.

"Let the hunters stand forward as their names are called," Sergeant Blair ordered the Indians in Cree when no reply came from the trader. "Tonight there will be much red meat in the lodges. One skin—one box. That is the debt. But first there will be a free gift from the Great White King. I have spoken!"

Continuing

HUGH PENDEXTER'S

Novel of the Nebraska Frontier

The Sun Chasers

EARLY in the Fifties when Nebraska was opened to homesteaders the temporary towns along the Missouri River were filled with restless pioneers who had followed the setting sun, some to press onward to the more dangerous frontiers of the gold fields and some to linger by the grassy hills and fertile bottoms they had found. Of such are empires built—those who hunger for land and gold, but are willing to suffer and work for it.

Roscoe Strong brought his son and daughter from Maine and founded a farm on a quarter section near Plattsmouth. After a hard winter and a summer in which the grasshoppers devoured their crops, the Strongs moved on to the North Fork. There many old friends who had shared the Strong larder in the first hard days looked them up. Old Bird of Freedom, a genial wildcat banknote speculator, brought his grandniece to visit Sam and Ruth Strong. Old Freedom immediately bought a herd of cattle from Strong's neighbors in the big soddy over the hill, paying for them with worthless paper. Nancy Freedom, not knowing that the neighbors were the notorious Toms gang of outlaws, rode over to pay them honest money.

There, unknowingly, she was to meet an old friend. Ten years before, when Strong's neighbor, Hancey, had been drowned in the river by two agents of the Land Claim Club, George Hancey had

sworn vengeance. He had already killed one man in the Tisk gang. The other murderer, Blackie, had escaped. For years George Hancey had trailed Blackie with consuming hatred. He gambled, joined gangs, earned the name of the Rattler, the better to follow his bad man. Nancy and the Strongs had not heard of him for years.

As Nancy entered the big soddy, Toms seized her by the wrist. Hancey leaped to his feet, pushed her out of the door and followed. Volleys rang from the windows. George was struck by a bullet, but he returned the compliment by shooting two of the gangsters. Then he set out to overtake Nancy, glad to neglect his pursuit of Blackie for the sake of an old friendship. Over the top of the hill he ranged alongside of Nancy's stirrup.

"QUEER meeting, Nance, after all these years."

"Sam never told me *you* were one of them!" she piteously cried.

"Sam's honest. He couldn't tell you that, Nance. I rode in on them a few hours before you came along. To think of meeting you like this! To think a clear headed girl like you could be fool enough to ride up to that hellhole! To think there was no one to stop you! And if I hadn't been there!"

"But you were there, George," she sobbed. "I'll never try to thank you. I was mad to do it; but I never dreamed of danger—that danger. No one knew I was going there. Uncle went away with the cows while I was down to the Strongs, and Sam was riding out here. Mr. Strong came to the ranch to tell him what that beast had said about his bringing in the rest of the bad money. I thought I could settle it if I took good money to them. Did you kill some of them?"

"Did for Toms, damn him!" he gritted. "Still he had time to draw. Hit some of the rest. Don't know how many, or how badly. Dropped the long cuss with the poker and the man at the door with the barrel of my gun. Slow down. There's no danger now."

"You went there on that old mad business?" she asked.

"Still driving me on. Seems like I can't rest till I find the one called Blackie."

"For all you know he may be dead."

"Not less he's cashed in within a week. Trailed him from Denver to Independence. Found his trail starting up this way. But I can't blame you for thinking bad of me."

"I'll always thank God you were there and knew how to handle a six-shooter," she fervently told him. "I have only beautiful thoughts about you. Now we must stop and let me look at your hand. You're going home with me. You've wandered a lot, and now you're going home."

"Flesh wound in the arm. Hand isn't hurt. It can wait if your home is near. A home would be a queer place for me. And Ruth?"

"We're most at their place, where we'll fix your arm. She's lovelier than ever, if that's possible."

"Married—of course?"

"I don't think Ruth will ever marry."

CHAPTER IX

THE RED BOLT

BIRD OF FREEDOM received Strong's warning at the Bracket ranch, where he had driven his cattle. As neither had an inkling of Nancy's sudden resolve to visit the soddy and end the disagreeable situation by paying over good money, both believed Freedom should absent himself until the men at the soddy had resumed their journey. Strong insisted that the cattle should be left behind and turned over to Toms, if he came up the valley. Freedom would not listen to the proposition and insisted that it was not necessary to make any such sacrifice.

"They're prime rascals," he argued. "They're served right! Served better than they deserve. For that money is just as good as any, if it can be kept moving. Paper money is just a token. It calls for faith and belief in one's fellow

man. Lots of money never issued by the Federal Government may have passed through your hands; but you had faith and took it and passed it along."

"I can't argue with a man who's as warped in his mind as you are, Freedom," angrily replied Strong.

"I ain't warped. Didn't the Omaha Bank take some of that money? If it's good enough for a bank it's far too good for a border ruffian. As for leaving the cattle here, that's all nonsense. I was on my way to market with them when you come along. If you go around to the other side of the house you'll find the covered wagon loaded. Brackets are moving."

"Good land! That woman broke out in that notion again?"

"She likes to see the country, and I'll be glad of their company. But we won't say anything about those men down at the soddy being up on their ear. I may be able to sell my cattle at the Kiowa station. If not there, then at Oak Grove. Failing in that I'll push right on to the Little Blue station, then to Pawnee Ranch, if necessary. If I don't find a market at Pawnee, I'll not stop to find a buyer till I've covered the fifty-four miles to Fort Kearny, where I probably could get the best price."

"And you've planned all this without letting Nancy know you were going away?"

"Women know too much already," grumbled Freedom. "That child is getting so uppity that she actually bosses me; but now I've talked with you, she can be told I'm away for a few days mebbe weeks. She's used to my traveling around a bit. Now let's go and see how the Brackets are getting along with loading."

They left the grazing cattle and walked to the house and around to the door in time to see Florida Bracket lifting a trunk over the tailboard. Those who were familiar with the Brackets' migratory habits and who had witnessed the loading, or unloading, of the wagon knew that the trunk was the last thing to be put in and the first to be taken off.

"They're finished and ready to start," said Freedom.

Strong's face was melancholy with regrets as he walked up to the wagon. Mrs. Bracket appeared in the doorway, her bonnet on, her beautiful brown eyes bright with anticipation of being on the move once more.

Strong greeted her by demanding:

"Now Betsy, what's up? You don't mean to say you're off meandering again."

Mrs. Bracket rested her hands on her hips and surveyed him reproachfully and replied:

"Roscoe Strong, you know full well how Freedom got us down here in this narrer valley. Of course, we oughter have known better after he sold us those town lots up north of the Platte, where only the Almighty could find them in a hurry."

"Now, Betsy," spoke up Freedom sternly. "You'n' Florida never lost anything by that deal. You turned a handsome profit. Three good houses and all that river land. It was snapped up."

"Why shouldn't it be snapped up?" she sighed. "When I think of how cheap we let all that fine property go, it makes my heart ache. All the comforts of home—wood, grass, water, game and the beginning of a fine burying ground. But it's gone, and to perfect strangers."

"Now, mother. Now, mother," pleaded Florida, as he finished lashing the last rope across the tailboard. "You would sell. I was willing to stay and rest my bones. I've set on a wagon seat so much it's hard for to stand up straight. But you said you'd feel lonesome and you would sell."

Strong prevented an argument by interrupting to inquire—

"Just where are you bound for?"

Freedom sighed softly, a bit of envy creeping into his soul as he pictured them ever footfree to seek the journey's end, which meant the end of the rainbow.

FLORIDA brushed the hair from his eyes and turned questioningly to his wife. In an aside he remarked—

"I don't even know which way to head my outfit."

Mrs. Bracket smoothed out her woolen skirt with both hands, meditated for a bit and then enlightened:

"I've been hankering for Drakeville most mortal. Been in my thoughts ever since we quit that dear place to become homeless wanderers on the face of the earth. When I think of the whippoorwills singing their lonesome tune through the night and the rich green of growing things in the spring, seems if I must have wings to git back there quick enough."

Florida stared in surprise and dubiously remarked:

"Then we ain't to head up the valley to the west? Back to Drakeville, eh? Well, I'll like that fine. I only wish you two friends and the young folks was going along with us. We'd be a happy neighborhood."

"It's too late to return to Drakeville now," sighed Mrs. Bracket. "It's like one of those sunny places we passed in our youth, good and tearful to think of, but, like youth, passed away. The old Drakeville isn't any more. New faces have crowded in. Of course, we oughter stayed there. But we must make a new start in a new place. Now Swinging Limb, down in Alabama, is a most likely place. Quiet, without being drowsy. Seasons keep the same the year round. No prairie fires, frosts, floods, grasshoppers, fleas. No busted banks to worry about. Leastwise, that's the way a man told it to me."

"I don't like the name, but if you hone to go there, I'll turn the hosses around," grumbled Florida.

"Land of mercy, Florida, how you do take the words out of a person's mouth!" irritably exclaimed his wife. Turning to Strong she continued, "It's the way with some men. The women folks don't count."

"Now, mother! Now, mother!"

"How many times, Florida, have I begged you not to 'now' me? It's like this, Roscoe Strong. You pass a pretty place and scorn it. Then you see it's true worth, but it's too late to go back. Neither Drakeville nor Swinging Limb is for us. We could have been mortal happy in either place . . . What I have in mind is the Oregon country, or Californy. If we don't find that one suits, we can try t'other. But if Florida had listened to me in the first place, we'd gone down on the heads of the Smoky and by this time we'd have a fine ranch and have made our everlasting fortunes with all gold miners flocking up the river."

"And been killed off by Injuns before we could eat supper," growled Florida. "Folks, I don't know just where we're bound for, but we're starting."

"Why, how you talk, Florida! Our plans is as plain as your nose. We're to travel to the Eubanks ranch, four miles west of Oak Grove, and while resting there we're to decide just what's best to do."

"Then I won't try to sell my stock at Kiowa. I'll go through with you folks as far as Fort Kearny, if you don't switch off the main road," said Freedom. "Just what are you going to do with your house and land?" And a speculative gleam brightened his blue eyes.

"Florida thought Roscoe here would buy it, or sell it for us," said Mrs. Bracket.

"I'll give fifty dollars an acre for it, and you can buy it back at that price inside of twelve months," promptly said Strong, "but you'll have to wait a few days before I can pay you the money."

"But we're ready to start," reminded Mrs. Bracket. "We'll get word to you when we've settled down and you can get the money to us. The money would be a nuisance to pack along now."

Strong was opposed to such haste, but Freedom impatiently announced:

"If we stand here talking much longer, Nancy will be showing up with her notions. I ain't exactly told her I'm taking a trip."

"Well, there's nothing to hinder us going. Money's as good as in a bank.

Hosses hitched in and everything packed," cheerily said Mrs. Bracket. "Now we'll say good-by to as good a friend as we ever had."

She gave Strong both hands and kissed him farewell and climbed into the wagon seat and wept.

Florida retained Strong's hand for half a minute.

"I'd liked to said good-by to the young folks," he muttered. "We've moved so much we never had time to have any of our own. You understand, Roscoe. Give the girls and Sam my dear love."

He turned quickly and stepped on the wheel hub and gathered up the reins.

"Good-by! Good-by!" sadly called Strong.

Florida shook the reins and the horses started. Freedom hurried to set his herd in motion ahead of the wagon. Strong, with his head held low, walked moodily down the valley. Freedom fell back beside the wagon and remarked:

"Nancy'll be peeved when Strong tells her I've gone. But she'll stay with Ruth and they'll take good care of her."

"Sam's crazy about her," said Mrs. Bracket, and she whisked the last tear from her eyes, and her faded face grew young with sympathy for romance.

Freedom was startled by her words and his expression was solemn as he said:

"If that's true I'm mighty sorry. Never dreamed of it. Doubt it now. Hope it ain't so. I like Sam as much as if he was my own boy. Nancy calls him son and seems to think he's still a child. If he's took a notion to her, he'll be disappointed. That Nancy's a case!"

Mrs. Bracket smiled and commented:

"Most men are fools part of the time. Some have the knack of being foolish all the time. Well, seems nice to be traveling again and seeing the wonders of nature."

"Folks with good eyesight can see nature without going around the world," Florida remarked in a crisp tone.

Mrs. Bracket wiped a sleeve across her eyes and in a scarcely audible voice said:

"I've been happy in that little home. I shall miss the quiet joy of the pretty valley."

"Good heavens, mother! We didn't have to leave!" cried Bracket. "We can turn round and go back in no time."

"We've made our decision. We must stick to it," she told him.

The faint glimmer of hope died from Florida's eyes.

THE LOADED wagon moved slowly behind the cattle. Mrs. Bracket leaned from the seat once to glance back at the ranch-house. She was genuine in her attachment to the home she was leaving, just as she had been unhappy for the first ten minutes after leaving every one of their homes. But the lust for questing after the setting sun was in her blood.

Kiowa station was only a mile from the abandoned ranch, and Bracket halted to exchange greetings with Joe and Fred Eubanks, who had just come in from the former's ranch a mile west of the station. Freedom was impatient to be moving, for in the back of his mind was the fear of Nancy's sudden appearance. She would scold him for setting off without her and would insist upon accompanying him. While the Eubanks stood talking with the Brackets a buffalo hide hunter in an empty wagon drove in at a gallop. Reining his lathered horses to a halt, he stood up and cried:

"Big band of Injuns on the Elk near the Fort Riley crossing. Their scouts chased me several miles. Dumped my load and drove hellity-larrup, or they'd had my hair."

Joe Eubanks scowled at the hunter and said—

"It's you men after hides and tallow that makes Injuns mad."

Before the hunter could reply, James Douglas, station manager, ran out and sharply demanded—

"What do you call a big band?"

"Must have been five hundred of 'em. Must have come up from the Republican."

"Did you see them, or only their scouts?"

"I couldn't stop to count 'em. There was a big mess of them far off and the young bucks riding ahead. I tell you they mean mischief."

"What you saw was Otoes, or Pawnees. And they wouldn't hurt you, mister, even if they do feel mad at seeing the buffalo killed for their hides," said the older Eubanks.

"When Injuns try to ride me down, I don't stop to see if they mean business, or simply want to beg a piece of tobaccer," said the hunter. "And the Injuns I saw was Sioux. I allow I know Sioux from Otoes and Pawnees. And they was painted for war. The Louis brothers told me a week ago there was an army of hostile reds down on the Solomon. I'm pushing right on east. Trouble's coming this way on hundreds of painted ponies. You'd all better clear out."

"Well, stop over tomorrer and rest your nags, tomorrer's Sunday," jeered a station hand.

"You can make fun, but I've fetched the word. Hosses good for five more fast miles, and that'll take me to Hackney's ranch. And once I git there I start for Brownsville. When the Government gits so it can handle these reds and protect its citizens, I'll come back."

"President Lincoln will feel bad when he knows you've quit us," said the station hand.

Douglas sternly told him:

"The country will get along fine if you and your hoggish kind never come back. If I was a Sioux or a Cheyenne I'd run you into the Big Muddy."

The man cracked his whip over his jaded animals and rode to the east. Mrs. Bracket reacted differently than did her husband and Bird of Freedom. The two men joined with the station hand in jeering laughter, as the hunter's long wagon rapidly diminished in size; but Betsy Bracket tugged at her husband's arm and whispered:

"I'm afraid, Florida. We'll turn back. I've dreamed of Injuns gitting us. I tell you I'm afraid. Turn around."

"Now, mother. Now, mother," he soothed. "Here we be, all packed up and nowhere in particular to go. But we must go somewhere, now we've started. We'll go on to Oak Grove ranch, and if there's any danger of the Injuns rising, Comstock will know all about it."

"We'll go back home and find the Strongs. Leastways, I'm going if I have to walk," Mrs. Bracket insisted.

"I haven't any doubt but what this is a false alarm, Betsy," assured Douglas. "Even if the hunter was chased, it doesn't mean the Indians are on the warpath. I always feel like chasing a hide hunter myself."

"I ain't scared of white men, nor fires, nor nothing, Jim Douglas, and you know it. But I can't abide painted Injuns up to deviltry. Turn around, Florida, or I git out and walk."

"Of all the notions!" groaned Bracket. "I begin to feel like a bird that ain't got any feet but must keep on the wing because he can't light. Well, Freedom, the little woman's changed her mind once more and back I must go, I suppose."

Bird of Freedom combed his white whiskers thoughtfully. He suddenly discovered that he did not care to go on alone. To Bracket he mumbled:

"Of course, there is a chance the hunter saw Injuns that wa'n't Otoe or Pawnee. Of course, there is a chance there's a mighty big camp of Sioux and Cheyennes down on the Solomon. Few years ago, before settlers came into this valley, they hung out on the Republican. And they could ride north mighty fast if they took the notion. And there's Nancy—Jim, step aside and talk trade with me a bit."

The station manager talked apart with him briefly, and the two proceeded to the station house. When Freedom returned to the wagon he was patting his pockets. He told the Brackets:

"Not as good a price as if I'd taken them to Kearny, perhaps. Half paid down, however, and the rest as good as if in my pocket this moment. A fair profit, seeing how I bought them."

"They cost you the time it took to drive them away from the big soddy and

what money you paid," mumbled Bracket, who was discouraged by his wife's sudden change of mind.

He rested his elbows on his knees and started the horses for the ranch. Freedom sat in the end of the wagon and chatted with Mrs. Bracket. Rather, he talked and Mrs. Bracket appeared to be listening. Her eyes, however, were constantly staring to the south as if she expected to behold a cloud of demoniac horsemen racing to cut off and surround the wagon.

They saw no signs of hostiles and arrived at the Bracket place just as the sun touched the western horizon. The wagon halted and Bracket jumped to the ground to unload, but Mrs. Bracket shrilly insisted:

"No, no! Keep on to the Strongs' place. It's only two miles and I seem to feel an awful danger crowding down to t'other side the river."

"Well, of all the notions!" sighed Bracket.

The journey was resumed and, when the Freedom ranch was reached, a halt was made for Freedom to enter and secure a double barreled shotgun and a rifle. He was wearing his revolver and bowie knife. He looked for Nancy's revolver, but could not find it.

WHEN they were within half a mile of the Strong ranch Roscoe Strong ran from the river to meet them. His eyes were filled with amazement but his voice was casual as he greeted:

"Finished your journey pretty quick. What give out?"

"Courage," snapped Florida Bracket.

Mrs. Bracket hurriedly explained her alarm. Strong glanced questioningly at the two men. Each smiled slightly and shook his head. Bracket was sarcastic in his brief description of the hide hunter's fear.

Strong said:

"Let's hope the fellow was mistaken. Let's hope there is no danger. But let's remember that if the Indians do come, neither of the three houses is fit to hold out against them. The big soddy is the place. If only those rascals, who've been staying there, have cleared out."

Freedom winced and remarked:

"I'd rather not meet them. They might demand their cattle back. Your house is pretty stout."

"While you've been gone Nancy foolishly went to the soddy. If George Hancey hadn't happened along by a miracle . . . Well, she might as well be caught by hostile Sioux as by those vermin. George got some of them, but he doesn't know how many."

"George Hancey back again?" screamed Mrs. Bracket.

"Nance went there? Hancey back here? I only hope some of 'em are left! You folks can tag along, but I'm in a hurry." And away Freedom ran, his long strides soon outdistancing the plodding wagon.

Strong kept with the Brackets and questioned them sharply as to just what the hide hunter had said. Bracket sullenly repeated that the scare was all nonsense.

Mrs. Bracket volubly insisted that the Little Blue was soon to be overrun by painted warriors.

As they drew near the ranch-house Hancey and Ruth Strong rode to meet them. Freedom already had given them the news, and Hancey now surprised Strong and the Brackets by announcing his belief in a terrible danger. He concluded by insisting:

"You folks can't lose anything by being careful. Throw some of your belongings into a wagon and pull out down the freight road toward the Kansas line."

"I begin to feel safe now," spoke up Mrs. Bracket. "And to think you're back in Nebraska, where you belong, where every young man has a golden chance to make a home! But not a word where you've been, or what you've been doing. But I'm mighty tickled, George, to know you've giving up roaming and have come back to settle down and make a home."

She darted a shrewd sidewise glance at Ruth's face.

Hancey winced at her speech and told her:

"If not for the Indian scare I would have found you and Florida gone roving. I think you two ought to settle down."

Bracket chuckled maliciously. Ruth gravely said:

"George doesn't feel he can settle down yet. He's planning to leave us soon."

"Then the bigger fool he!" snapped Mrs. Bracket.

"I shall not leave while any danger threatens," George hastily assured.

Strong said:

"You're mighty close mouthed, George, but Nancy told me all about it. She said it was a terrible fight in the big soddy and that you whipped the whole crowd. One man shooting against half a dozen."

"Nothing to talk about. Two were out of the fight before it started. Toms was the only one to race me to the draw."

"You whipped them!" cried Ruth, her cheeks flushing. "I've criticized you for roaming about and forgetting your old friends. But if roving taught you how to handle a revolver when Nancy was in danger, I'll thank God for the roving!"

"I'm pretty clever with a shooting iron myself," said Freedom, "but in a hand to hand muss I'd rather have a knife. Never misses fire. Goes where it's aimed."

He would have continued proclaiming his prowess if not for the arrival of Nancy and Sam. They rode at a gallop, and Sam called out:

"Three men rode away from the big soddy in a hurry, leading three horses. Left their mules."

"How did you learn that?" asked Hancey.

"Mule skinner called at the ranch to kill time while a freight wagon was being repaired. Looks like George got three of them for keeps."

Freedom threw up his head, the old speculative glitter lighting his gaze. He said:

"If they left them mules to shift for themselves it's my duty to care for them. And if any Injuns come into this valley to hand out harps to honest settlers that soddy is the place to stand them off from."

"The soddy would be all right," admitted Hancey slowly, "if some of us men go ahead and clear it out. Can't be pretty place for women to enter if it's like what I left it."

Strong and the Brackets preferred to seek refuge in the soddy rather than to take to the open road, even if they made for the Kansas line. Sam was skeptical as to danger. Hancey remained gravely concerned. As they halted before the Strong house he suddenly announced:

"My hoss can't be beaten by anything on four legs. I'm going to cross the river and ride toward the Elk for a short distance."

Ruth opposed his going, and insisted that he should give his wounded arm a chance to rest and heal. Sam was eager to make the scout, but Hancey silenced them by saying:

"Have done talking. I'm going. I have the best horse. There will be no danger. My hurt has been cleansed and dressed and amounts to nothing. If any Indians are near the Elk they will be going into camp and I shall see their fires. While I'm gone, pack up food and all the guns and move to the big soddy. Take along tubs to be filled with water. There must be a well, or spring, near the house, as Tom's men didn't go to the river for water. Two of you men go on ahead, as the house may need cleaning out."

Before they could attempt to dissuade him he was riding to ford the river and follow up the south bank to the west toward the Elk.

There was no suggestion of impending evil in the quiet river bottom. Mrs. Bracket watched the men bring forth arms and water containers, while Ruth and Nancy packed supplies of food. Then Strong's cattle were started up the slope, driven along by Strong and Sam on horseback. Mrs. Bracket complained:

"We'd been better off to have kept going. We'd be ahead of trouble by this time. Now we're back in the middle of it. You should have pushed on, Florida."

"We'll wait a day till we know the

facts. We won't lose much time. We've spent all our married life in a wagon, hunting for a home. A day's halt won't matter," replied Florida as he took his place in the wagon and started the horses up the slope behind the small herd of cattle.

THE WAGON halted on top of the ridge and the Brackets looked down on the narrow valley. The brim of the sun showed above the horizon and the twilight in the lowlands suggested only rural peace. The cattle were moving along the ridge to be turned out to graze on the north side of the soddy. Bracket spoke to his horses, and the wagon creaked forward. His wife remarked:

"As quiet as a Pennsylvania village on the Sabbath day. I do believe there's no more danger here than there is this minute back in blessed Drakeville."

"And no danger up the valley. But you would come back here, Betsy," her husband reminded with an edge to his voice.

Then he realized the hopelessness of an argument, and subsided, his body bent over so his elbows could rest on his knees.

Mrs. Bracket's voice was almost sprightly as she continued—

"Well, Florida, if any Injuns do show up, it's a sign my first judgment was right and that we oughter started for Swinging Limb as I advised."

Bracket straightened and was framing a warm disclaimer to any and all intimations that he had ever opposed the Swinging Limb journey, but never got beyond the opening of his defense. For his gaze, in resting on the other side of the river, southwest of their position, had picked up motion. He stared intently for a moment, then whispered hoarsely:

"Look! One man riding like hell!"

"Taking up swearing at your time of life!" wailed Mrs. Bracket. "What man? Where? What of it?"

He pointed his whip. The Strongs had discovered the horseman and were shading their eyes from the last level rays of the sun. Bracket called out:

"Young Hancey, and riding like the devil was after him! Only his nag can scoot along like that!"

Their glimpses of him were intermittent, as the patches of willows hid him from view at times. It was Nancy Freedom who first discovered his pursuers, but her voice was scarcely audible as she cried—

"Three men are stringing along behind him!"

"They'll never catch him!" shouted Bird of Freedom, stepping excitedly up and down without moving out of his tracks.

Hancey, well in the lead, had been identified by the swiftness of his mount. Now he was near enough to be distinguished as a white man. His pursuers, bobbing dots when first sighted, rapidly developed into spotted ponies and naked riders. The drama became nerve wracking as a white puff rose from the foremost of the Indians. Ruth Strong cried, "Oh!" before the dull report reached the top of the ridge.

"By Judas! That settles it!" shouted Bird of Freedom. "Injuns chasing him to make a kill! The hide hunter was right!"

Strong senior quietly commanded:

"Bracket and Freedom go with the women to the soddy. Get the food inside and fill the tubs. Turn the cattle loose north of the building. George has a long lead and, unless his horse is hit, he'll make the crossing. Sam and I will cover him. There's only three of them. Every one step sharp!"

He wheeled his horse and rode down the slope with Sam at his side. Hancey was taking to water when they reached the willow fringed bank. The south bank was clear of trees behind Hancey. A short distance upstream was a patch of timber. Hancey was halfway across, wading and swimming behind his horse when his pursuers came from behind the patch of willows and raced the ponies in a final desperate effort to get the white man. The presence of the Strongs on the north bank was unsuspected. Strong fired at the foremost Indian and kicked up a handful of dust in front of him. Almost instantly the pony pivoted and was racing back to

cover. The other two riders also vanished over the side of their mounts and raced back to shelter. Sam fired, but did no damage.

Hancey came up the bank and sharply asked—

"Where are the women folks?"

Strong informed him and anxiously asked how many Indians he had seen. Walking beside his horse for a bit Hancey said he had seen twenty-five or thirty at a considerable distance, with three braves scouting ahead.

"We saw each other at the same time," he continued. "The main band was traveling in a line that would cut the river much higher up. I don't know whether they joined in the chase or not. I'm hoping they won't bother us down here."

The three men kept glancing backward as they made up the slope. They halted on the ridge and were relieved at discovering no signs of the enemy. Strong began worrying lest the Kiowa station be captured by a surprise attack. He believed it to be his duty to ride north with a warning. Hancey emphatically opposed this proposal.

"We have three women to look after. You'd be snagged before you could make the station, if it's in any danger. There's enough men at the station to stand off an attack."

WHEN they reached the soddy they found the Bracket wagon in front of the door and some ten feet from it. The cattle were grazing on the north side of the soddy. The mules, still picketed, were feeding on the south side and close to the river. The three women were filling the last of the tubs and pails from a spring a short distance down the slope, while Bracket and Freedom were improvising shutters for the windows.

Nancy Freedom came up with a pail of water as the Strongs and Hancey dismounted. She pointed toward the rear of the soddy and told Hancey—

"Thanks to you, George."

Three mounds, freshly made, broke the level of the grass land and marked the last resting place of Toms and two of his men. The survivors of the fight had buried their companions before riding away to be seen by the mule skinner. Sam Strong grabbed Hancey's hand and gave it a mighty squeeze and hoarsely whispered—

"If I'd done that I'd feel mighty proud, Rattler!"

"Never that name," harshly replied Hancey. "And I had all the advantage, not being afraid of hitting a friend and being the first to shoot. Ought to have bagged all of them. But if we're jumped by that band across the river I'll be wishing the dead men were here alive to help us."

"Help from those beasts?" exclaimed Ruth.

"They'd be fighting for their lives. They'd fight mighty good. In a pinch, with women along, I'd accept help from Satan himself."

"Well, there ain't going to be no trouble," assured Bird of Freedom. "Now we're here we'll camp for the night and tomorrer I'll take my mules back to the ranch."

"If you don't shift them to better feed you won't find any mules in the morning," warned Hancey. "They've about fed out the lengths of their ropes."

Freedom hurried down the slope and commenced moving the herd farther up the bank. Sam, finding nothing vital to their defense needed his attention, went down and helped the old man. Mrs. Bracket lighted a fire inside the soddy and, after the flames conquered the darkness, she ran to the door and announced:

"Two boxes in here. One has the cover ripped off and is filled with big pistols."

Hancey ran inside to examine the weapons. There were twelve of them, all of the Colt Navy model. None had been used; and it was plain they represented some of Toms' loot from a freight train or supply depot. Hancey opened the second box and gave a cheer that brought his friends to the fire-place. Flourishing a revolver in each hand he cried:

"Great luck! A dozen thirty-sixes! And a box of waterproof ammunition.

I'm going to load the lot of them. Two apiece for each of us men and one for each of the girls. If we should be rushed, they'll think a small army is in here. And for good measure, we have the guns we brought with us."

He squatted before the fire and rapidly charged gun after gun, the necessary caps being found in the same box with the cartridges. Strong and Bracket and the women went outdoors to watch against a surprise attack upon Freedom and Sam, still busy with shifting the mules to new grazing ground. This work took time, as each iron picket pin was a foot and a half in length and had to be pounded deep into the ground. Many of the picket lines, each fifty feet in length, had become tangled and had to be unsnarled.

The watchers on the ridge became worried as darkness filled the river bottom. Mrs. Bracket roundly scored Freedom for endangering all for the sake of the mule herd. Hancey, with three guns in his belt and one in each hand, ran down the slope to stand guard while his friends finished the work. He had intended to urge Freedom to abandon his task, but he barely began talking before the old man gave him to understand that no thieving redskins could profit by his industry and run off his mules.

The work was finally completed and the three men mounted the slope and found that the women had supper ready. Hancey and young Strong took their food outdoors and kept watch while eating. It was then agreed that the young men should stand guard until after midnight. It was light on the ridge and the dusk of the river bottom was thinning out when the two sentinels called their elders and laid down for a few hours of sleep.

When they awoke breakfast was awaiting them, the others having eaten. No signs of Indians had been discovered, and Bracket was arguing against his wife's proposal that they hitch up and drive down into western Kansas. Strong came back from inspecting his cattle and Freedom returned from straightening out picket lines in the mule herd.

"Today is Sunday," remarked Hancey, as he finished eating. "Sometimes one loses sight of the days of the week in the gold camps. It's going to be a warm, muggy day."

"August seventh," reminiscently added Sam. "Just about eight years ago we met outside of Plattsmouth, George. That's quite a stretch of time."

Hancey's face twisted with a spasm of pain.

"Dad was with me then," he murmured. "Yes, that was very long ago. Almost in another world. And I've spent eight years, almost, in hunting for that man."

"Don't hunt any longer, George. Blackie is dead by this time. His kind make a quick finish. Whisky or a bullet has done for him long before this. Stay here with us. Take up land. Quit roaming around like a tramp."

"He isn't dead. You're forgetting I trailed him to Independence. Unless he's died very recently he's alive and up to his tricks."

"I don't blame you for the hate you feel. I'd feel the same way. But why spoil your life?"

Hancey made no answer for a minute, but kept his eyes on Ruth as she walked around the corner of the house. Then he irrelevantly remarked:

"Remember how you did for the Deacon. If you'd gone on to the camps you'd carried a big reputation as a bad man. Other bad men, being jealous, would hunt you up to try you out. Never believed you had it in you, Sam."

"I was crazy scared as well as crazy mad. It was over before I knew it. I told father, but not the girls, so be careful. I used to dream about it, but not for a long time now. What gave me a jolt I never got over was to learn you were the Rattler."

"You never told the girls that?" anxiously whispered Hancey.

"No! And won't. But some day you'll tell them. Quit being the Rattler and be a rancher—back in Maine we'd say farmer. Out here a farm's a ranch. Took

me some time to get used to it. See here, if you'd quit your man hunt and go in with me we'd make some money out of cattle. Too much free grass land to keep cattle ranches from springing up. Buffaloes surely disappearing. Cattle will take their place. Once the Indians are taken in hand, many fortunes will be made out of cattle."

"I don't think so. Indians will always be a nuisance unless killed off. They'll live off your herds. Winter storms will wipe out herds. In a small way a man can handle cattle and supply beef for camps and nearest towns; but never in a big way. And I'm too unsettled in my mind to be any good at anything." He broke off and commenced singing "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower."

MRS. BRACKET'S voice in a shrill crescendo announced:

"If you think I'm going to stay cooped up on this ridge till we have to live on cut straw and 'lasses, Florida, you're mortally mistook. It's either down through Kansas to the river, and then to dear Swinging Limb, or up the Oregon road. You fetched me out here to find a home. Where is it? I vow I won't die in a wagon! I want to git settled."

Freedom came hurrying from the rear end of the soddy and anxiously asked:

"Where's Strong? Where's the girls?"

"Inside," Sam answered, but coming to his feet as he observed the frosty gleam in the old man's blue eyes.

"Afraid some of 'em had wandered. Something down by the river I don't like. Every one keep inside. Betsy Bracket, don't show your nose at that door again!"

Sam ran to get his rifle. Hancey stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt and studied the fringe of willows. Strong hurried from the soddy, followed by his son. Florida Bracket, standing by the south window, yelled—

"Something moving in the willows!"

The men outside had seen nothing, except that the mules had ceased grazing and were looking toward the stream. Then the Sunday quiet was shattered by a ferocious howling. Several almost naked figures leaped from the willows, each wildly waving and flapping a blanket before him. Although his heart was pounding violently in anticipation of the new and terrible experience, Sam found himself thinking of huge bats as the Indians leaped from side to side and charged the mules.

Freedom fired his rifle and the Indians dived for cover. The mules bolted up the slope, each with fifty feet of rope and a long picket pin snapping and whipping the air. The iron pins gave wicked wounds when they chanced to hit a mule and added to the blind terror of the herd. Sam Strong opened fire on the willows and was answered by shots that went wild. He gave no heed to the mules, now almost upon him.

Hancey advanced and stood by his friend and shouted something Sam did not understand because of his excitement. Mules were streaming by on both sides of the two men; then came a compact mass cutting them off from the soddy. Bird of Freedom in the doorway frantically screamed:

"Flat on your faces! Lie face down, you young fools!"

Hancey was first to comprehend their danger and tripped Sam's feet from under him. Both fell, faces down, as the terrified animals surrounded them. Flying picket lines became tangled, and when they gave way the tension caused the heavy pins to whir with deadly velocity. To be hit by one of these swishing missiles meant horrible wounds, or death. As the mules passed in their mad flight the alarm was spread to the grazing cattle on the north side of the soddy.

Hancey and Sam kept on their faces, expecting every moment to feel a hoof on head or back. They could hear the swish of the picket lines. They remained face down even after the mules had passed the soddy. The three men by the door were raking the river bank with their rifles. The concealed warriors commenced firing at the young men on the ground, the bullets hurling dirt dangerously close to them.

"Git up! Git up! Want to be killed!" yelled Bird of Freedom.

Not until they heard these words did they realize there was no more danger from the stampede. Jumping to their feet and bending low they raced to the soddy. As they plunged through the doorway they heard Freedom groan:

"There goes my prime mules to hell! Took Strong's cows along with 'em!"

The firing from the river ceased once Sam and Hancey reached cover. The latter examined his revolvers and was the only one who did not have a rifle. Freedom found the double barreled shotgun. This he offered to Hancey, saying—

"Load with balls fit to bust."

"Keep it," said Hancey. "When they get near enough for shotguns I'll get busy with my belt guns."

Reaching over his shoulder Freedom drew his long bowie knife and stuck it in a log and hoarsely defied—

"Now come on to close quarters, you red scum."

But no Indian showed himself. The firing from the willows ceased. The men in the soddy withheld their fire until they could see something to shoot at.

"Up to some tricks," remarked Mrs. Bracket quietly. "You girls better help me with the vegetables. We'll have to eat our dinner in here."

The heat of the day increased, and inside the soddy it was insufferably hot. After half an hour of inactivity Strong senior ventured the opinion that the Indians had withdrawn. Mrs. Bracket gently insisted that he keep back from the door and that no one pass by the south window without bending low. She overcame the men's impatience by reminding that not even a shadow of chance was to be taken so long as the two young women were sharing the risk.

She was the first to suggest that the attack on the soddy was but a detached bit of a general war, probably now raging along the Little Blue and along the Platte. Later they were to learn that even while she talked the Sioux under Spotted Tail and Pawnee Killer were raiding east of Fort Kearny and the Cheyennes were killing west of that post, while the Arapahoes, generally friendly to the whites, were carrying the fighting up the South Platte and almost to the doors of Denver.

The morning wore on with none daring to step outside the door. Although no shots were fired, Bracket filled the south window with the improvised shutter and through a peephole in this kept watch on the river. A faint smoke rose above the willows, testifying the Indians' presence on the bank. Bird of Freedom in the doorway discovered what he took to be smoke up the valley. Strong studied it and startled his companions by announcing:

"We're in for bad times out here. Kiowa stage station is burning."

He was mistaken and yet not entirely. Hackney's ranch, several miles east of the Kiowa station, was burning. And yet danger was close to Kiowa; for as they watched the faint smoke, a boy, Theodore Ulich, was being killed a mile from the stage station, and Joe Eubanks had been killed a mile to the the east of it, and his young brother Fred just to the west of it.

The Kiowa station escaped destruction because of the presence of a west-bound ox train of twenty-six wagons, with thirty armed men, to the west and a mule train of twenty wagons in camp just east of the station. The mule train was loaded with liquor.

The courage of the three families might have been shaken, and it is possible they might have attempted to abandon the soddy and strive to gain the freight road and northern Kansas, could they have known of the many people killed, the many ranches burned and stock run off, and that the road across the plains would be closed for a month while the Denver mail would be sent across the Isthmus to San Francisco, thence back east over the mountains to Colorado.

FREEDOM and Strong stood by the north window, looking for the stampeded mules and cattle. Bracket was occupied with spying from the south window.

Sam and Hancey were talking with Ruth and Nancy as the latter prepared the dinner near the fireplace. Mrs. Bracket from the doorway quietly announced:

"Now we must give them a warming. They're coming along the ridge!"

Before the men could grab their guns and run to the door they heard the dull *boom-boom* of guns and the sound of yelling. The Bracket wagon obstructed the view and Strong called on Bracket and the young men to help move it farther north. By the time they had shifted it some fifty feet they could see a man galloping toward the soddy. His course, from the northwest, suggested that he had been traveling west along the freight road when the Indians discovered him.

Behind him raced a dozen Indians strung out on a wide front so that each might use his rifle. The thrilled spectators saw the puffs of smoke run along this line. The hunted man seemed to be a part of his horse. Without changing his reclining position he emptied a revolver at his pursuers.

"He packs big guns," muttered Hancey. "Nothing lessn'n forty-fours by the sound."

As the chase drew closer Sam and his father opened fire. As one the Indians went over the sides of their ponies and turned at right angles and made for the river. From the fringe of willows rose a chorus of savage yells and a volley at the soddy. Sam pulled his father back inside the doorway. The fugitive half straightened when he discovered the Sioux were no longer chasing him. He slowed his pace and emptied a second heavy gun at those riding down the slope to join their companions in the willows. Then he kicked his horse savagely in the ribs and tore down to the soddy and leaped from the saddle.

The top of one ear had been shot off and the side of his face and neck was covered with blood. As he wearily dropped from his horse Sam Strong stared at him in wild amazement. Before he could speak Hancey's hand, gripping a Colt, slid over his shoulder and he was yelling:

"Blackie! By all the luck!"

It was Strong senior who struck Hancey's weapon and seized him by the wrist. Blackie crouched low and screamed—

"What's the matter with you?"

"You! You murderer! I've hunted for years to come up with you!" panted Hancey, trying to wrest his weapon free and trying to draw a gun with his left hand. But Sam held that hand.

Mrs. Bracket ran forward and rested a hand on Hancey's shoulder and softly reminded:

"This is a fighting man, George. We need them."

"Not him! Not him! I need him *dead!*" gritted Hancey.

Ruth now came up to him and he ceased struggling as he met her clear eyes. She gently said:

"George, remember what you said to me: 'With women along I'd accept help from the devil himself.' Those weren't good words; but you said them. Women are along. Your trouble with this man must wait."

Blackie, helpless with empty weapons, stared wildly about. To ride on with his tired horse was death. Recognition shone in his eyes as he rested his gaze on Hancey's drawn face.

"South Loup!" he hoarsely muttered. "Be I to be killed without a show?"

Florida Bracket caught the outlaw by the shoulder and pushed him inside the soddy, saying:

"You come here unasked. You come to save your hide. You're going to stay and make one honest fight. Hancey, there's three women here. You must wait."

Hancey relaxed and in a faint voice promised:

"He shall help us fight. My business has waited so long it can wait a bit longer. No need to hold me."

To Blackie, peering from the doorway he said:

"You helped kill my dad. I've vowed to kill you. But I'll wait till we're out of

this mess. Once we're clear of it we'll shoot it out."

"Have it that way," muttered Blackie. "All I ask is, no shooting in the back. Just give me a chance if the reds don't get us."

"I'll give you a chance. That's something you didn't give my dad. I'm doing it for the sake of the women. If we two were alone here and the reds were at the open door I'd do for you, or go under trying. But you can use a gun. You're half red. You understand Indians. And you can fight."

"I can fight. I will fight," growled Blackie. "A thousand bullets rather than to be caught by them. They hate me worse than a white man because I am half red and they say I'm a renegade."

"Then that's settled," bruskly broke in Freedom. "Our work's cut out. What news do you fetch?"

"Hackney's ranch burned. Hide hunter, just arrived, was killed and scalped. Every ranch between Kiowa station and Fort Kearny will go up in smoke before this business is over."

"I think the Injuns are up to some new mischief," announced Mrs. Bracket from the peephole in the west window.

CHAPTER X

FIGHT AND FLIGHT

BLACKIE joined Mrs. Bracket at the window and pushed her aside that he might use the peephole. Strong made another crevice in the shutter. The others waited to learn what trick the enemy was about to play. Strong began:

"They're pushing a pair of wheels from the willows. They have a contraption of planks rigged between the wheels for a shield. Made fast to the axle, most likely."

"Behind the planks they have dry stuff," added Blackie. "They plan to push the wheels against the walls and set the stuff on fire and run away under cover of the smoke."

"Will this place burn easy?" whispered Ruth.

"They can't burn the dirt," said Mrs. Bracket, "but the dead grass is dry as tinder. And there's enough wood in the roof to make a smoke that'll choke us out of here."

"Let's have a look," growled Bird of Freedom, and he pulled Blackie away.

The heavy wheels, with a structure of bulletproof planking, were advancing up the grassy slope as fast as the Indians pushing on the long tongue could walk. Freedom could catch no glimpse of the men behind the planks as the bottom of the timbers brushed the turf. He profanely expressed his disgust and said:

"I'll bet a cookie a white man helped to rig that. What do you know about any white man running with that parcel?"

Blackie said:

"There was a white man in the big camp on the Solomon. Ran away and turned red to save his neck after killing a sergeant at Fort Kearny several years ago. The Sioux call him White Killer; but I don't know that he's with that outfit."

"Maybe it's some of one eyed George Bent's work," mumbled Freedom. "Planks hang so low no chance of hitting their feet."

Hancey impatiently announced:

"Talking about it won't help any. We can at least show them we're awake."

Having said this he stepped to the door and passed outside and commenced firing two thirty-sixes, every bullet smacking into the timbers. The wheels ceased their brisk advance and barely crawled after his first shot. Almost the instant he cleared the doorway rifles cracked along the edge of the willows, and the lead flew dangerously close. Ignoring the fire, Hancey emptied his weapons with amazing celerity and leaped back through the doorway.

"You slowed 'em down," said Freedom at the peephole. "But now they're coming along same as usual."

Hancey would have repeated his risky tactics, but Ruth earnestly protested:

"You do wrong, George, to risk

your life that way. It does no good."

"Something must be done!" he insisted.

"Better make a hole in the roof and try a plunging fire," advised Blackie.

Shaking off Ruth's hand, Hancey seized another pair of guns and made for the door, while his friends heaped boxes and firewood so that Freedom could reach high up between the roof poles and cut a small opening in the baked sod with his bowie knife. This time Hancey remained partly sheltered at the corner of the soddy as he fired his guns. Mrs. Bracket seized a rifle and began shooting through the shutter and sending her bullets at the willows. It was Hancey's appearance at the corner of the soddy that held the concealed enemy's attention, until Freedom revealed the new loophole by opening up a plunging fire on the wheels. Immediately the Indians in the willows shifted their attention to the roof.

Hancey leaped inside and seized two more revolvers and was through the doorway and running rapidly along the ridge for a short distance before friend or foe could guess his purpose. He had planned to take a position which would permit him to rake the Indians behind the planks. He halted and dropped on his face just as the guns in the willows were turned on him. Four painted men were holding the tongue and crouching low. The range was long, and with the first shot the wheels slowly began to swing about with the four men crowding close to the axle. Out of the twelve shots he wounded one of the men.

With a yell of triumph he jumped to his feet and ran for the door. He all but fell over Nancy Freedom as he leaped to cover, as she was crouching close to the door, busily reloading the empty guns.

"If I'd had brains enough to have taken another brace with me I might have stopped that wheel game," he cried.

He would have said more if not for the spectacle of Florida Brackett sitting on the earth floor while his wife tied up a ghastly wound in his face.

"They counted coup," explained Blackie. "Bullet passed through his cheek and knocked out two teeth in the upper jaw in passing out close to his nose. He's damn' lucky at that."

Freedom, firing through the roof, winked his eyes clear of dirt scattered by bullets striking the sods and hoarsely warned—

"Them cussed wheels is coming again!"

Hancey, raging helplessly, thrust three guns in his belt and holding one in each hand, started for the door again. Nancy and Ruth tried to stop him, but he shook them off and shouted:

"Make holes through the walls! Every one begin shooting at the willows. Leave the wheels to me!"

Again he ran along the ridge to get a shot at the men behind the moving barricade. This time the wheels began to turn the moment he appeared. It was impossible for him to repeat his first success without withdrawing too great a distance from the soddy. Nor did the wheels turn enough to permit those in the soddy to hit a man.

Guns cracked rapidly in the willow and all shots were sent at Hancey. The fire from the soddy was very heavy, as all except Bracket were using revolvers and rifles; but this shower of lead did not diminish the fire from the willows. The bullets were striking close to Hancey's prostrate figure and he feared the return to cover would be interrupted. He rose to his feet and, bending low, ran as he never ran before. He was surprised that his path was not scattered with lead. When he reached the door he realized that the fire from the river had suddenly slackened.

HE HEARD Freedom complain—

"Smoke hides everything."

He pulled Sam from a peephole and beheld smoke billowing up along the edge of the growth.

The wheels were stationary and would soon be blurred as the wind from the south brought the smoke up the slope.

"Trying to smoke us out," muttered Mrs. Bracket, patting her suffering husband's shoulder. "Well, Florida, we've

traveled along for years together, and neither of us ever did want to go on alone."

Bracket groaned because he could not talk. He stood up, making violent gestures which took the place of violent denunciation of the enemy, and picked up a gun.

"That smoke's foolish!" cried Sam from the shutter. "It can't hurt us. If they think it'll let the wheels come close to the wall we'll fool them by letting them come along and bag the whole lot by shooting around the corner."

"Sam's right," endorsed his father. "Let the wheels come along. Stop shooting till they get close."

This speech deterred Hancey from leaving shelter again. Low in the wall he made an opening. The wheels had halted. The smoke, drifting up the slope, increased in density and already had blotted the edge of the timber from view. But he scarcely could believe it would hold thick enough to permit an unseen approach.

Ruth kneeled beside him and whispered—

"Well, George, looks like it was going to be close fighting, doesn't it?"

"They're planning to mask the approach of the wheels," he replied, "but they can't make enough smoke to do that. Breeze thins it out too much."

"We're cooped up. They'll get us!"

"They're no nearer it now than they were when they started."

She touched his arm and nodded toward the bloody face of Florida Bracket. Then she whispered:

"First one, then another will be hit. You'll never let them take me alive?"

He stared at her, his thin face twisted into an expression of terrible anguish, and his eyes round with a dread they had never contained before. His staring gaze wandered to the big gun she was clutching in both hands. She shuddered violently and whispered:

"I might not have the courage. I might go mad and forget. But you?"

"If it comes to that . . . Together. You mustn't be taken alive. Why doesn't God pity us?"

As he betrayed terrible mental distress she became calmer and encouraged:

"He will. We must believe that. I feel stronger."

THE Indians throughout the central plains were beseeching their medicine to pity and help them. Governor Evans of Colorado by proclamation was advising posses of citizens to hunt down and kill every hostile Indian they could find. While this advice was prompted by the terrible danger and suffering caused by red raids it had its flare back. Friendly Indians were to find themselves at the mercy of revengeful and ignorant immigrants, while it afforded an excellent opportunity for the lawless to appropriate the red man's ponies and other property after having eliminated the owners.

When the horses were run off from an immigrant train on the South Platte in July, as well as stock from the Bijou, Junction and Murray ranches, the tribes were held up as the most despicable and venomous of mankind. The Indians, however, had no newspapers to chronicle their losses, which were to include their immemorial habits of life.

"I hoped you'd come back and settle down," continued Ruth.

Hancey's face was bleak with rage and despair. His gaze rested on Blackie who was industriously shooting from the peephole, and the girl knew he was blaming the half-breed for the loss of great happiness. Ruth guessed his thought and patted his hand and whispered:

"Don't think of him. Just think of ourselves."

"You've waited—for me—all these years," he muttered.

She nodded, her frank eyes telling him more clearly than could any words.

"And I've been a gold camp tramp, hunting for that beast! And now fate sends him to me and makes me helpless!"

"Those other men. You saved Nancy from them. Yet you wished them here to help fight the Sioux."

"I'm accepting him as a fighting man—now."

He turned to the loophole to watch the wheels. He could not perceive that they had advanced. The smoke blowing up the slope was heavier, but scarcely dense enough to conceal the wheels.

Hancey cried:

"They can't do it! They can't send enough smoke to hide that contraption. They've tried two tricks and failed. Now they'll get discouraged. They'll be thinking there are easier victims along the road."

"Wheels beginning to move!" warned Freedom.

Sam insisted that no shots be fired until the wheels got close to the soddy. He added—

"The smoke will help hide us when we jump through the door and go after them."

But the wheels advanced only a short distance before coming to a halt. The besieged were surprised to see a white cloth wave over the top of the planks. Freedom shouted a warning against some new trick. Strong senior at the window called out—

"What do you want?"

A white man's voice replied—

"We want a man called Blackie."

"Want and be damned!" defied Bird of Freedom from the small opening in the roof.

"He's neither white nor red. He was born half Cheyenne. His mother's people are keen to dance his hair. Throw him out and we'll ride away."

"And you was born white, damn you!" yelled Freedom.

"I'm red enough now. Will you trade that renegade half-breed for your lives? I'll give you five minutes to think it over."

Hancey stared at Blackie, whose dark face was twisted with fear. The breed shook his head and his hand shook as he raised a revolver, and clapped the muzzle to the side of his head.

"They can't git me alive," he announced in a croaking voice, "and they won't trade for me dead. A move to throw me out means I'll kill myself. Even if they got me alive they'd never quit trying to git you folks."

Freedom remarked:

"We didn't ask him to come here. He's a rare villain. But he's stood up to the fighting since he joined us."

Hancey answered:

"I'd gladly trade the life of every man in this soddy if it would place the women in safety. But even if we threw this murderer out it would only mean we'd lost a fighting man. Those snakes can't be trusted, and we let this fellow join us to help in the fighting. We'll make no trade."

The renegade behind the barrier called out:

"What talk do you make? Trade a skunk's worthless life for all your lives? He killed a Cheyenne woman. The Cheyennes are bound to git him."

"Give him his answer, George," said Strong.

Hancey called out:

"We won't trade. By and by I'm going to kill him myself."

BLACKIE'S twisted features relaxed and he replaced the revolver in his belt. He hoarsely whispered:

"That man talking is White Killer. Trails with Spotted Tail's Tetons. He's worse'n a Sioux."

A wild chorus of howls rose from the river growth. Freedom from his perch joyously announced:

"Wheels going back to the timber, hell-to-larrup! Posse of whites must be coming up."

The besieged set up a cheer and Florida Bracket waved his arm to express what he could not shout.

"Smoke's thinning out!" cried Strong. "They're quitting. Too tough a nut for them to crack. Tried two tricks—"

"Mercy land!" interrupted Betsy Bracket in a screaming voice. "Smoke's growing thicker! What's that crackling sound?"

"They've out tricked us!" bellowed Bird of Freedom, jumping to the floor and combing his long beard nervously

and glaring about like some wild thing in a trap. "The smoke and the wheels was to keep us from seeing 'em sneak up and build a fire against the back end."

For a few seconds men and women stood as if benumbed and saw wisps of smoke penetrate the roof and steal inside around the rude chimney. Hancey was the first to recover from bewilderment. With a gun in each hand he darted out of the door and ran along the north side of the soddy. As he showed himself at the rear end of the long structure he was greeted with yells of derision and exultation from the willows.

Bundles of grease soaked fagots piled against the back wall of the soddy were blazing fiercely and sending up sheets of flame that ran over the sides and roof to lick up the dried grass. In spots the fire was eating through to the supporting roof poles. He raced back, realizing the interior of the soddy would soon be an oven and would quickly fill with suffocating smoke.

A beating of hoofs on his right caused him to halt and throw up a gun, but it was one of Bracket's horses wildly running up to the smoking soddy in search of human companionship. The harness had not been removed and the animal was glad to have Hancey catch him. Trembling violently he pressed his head under Hancey's arm. The second horse came pounding after his mate just as Sam Strong rounded the corner. To him Hancey shouted:

"Catch t'other one! We'll hitch them to the wagon! Our one slim chance!"

The smoke was driving the other inmates of the soddy to and through the doorway. The young men got the horses beside the pole. Mrs. Bracket, quick of wit and capable, ran forward and slipped in the bits and stood at the heads of the frightened animals while the young men secured the tugs. By this time the Indians were whooping along the edge of the willows and mounting their ponies and firing their guns.

"Clear out the wagon!" screamed Mrs. Bracket.

Hancey whistled shrilly on his fingers and his horse came racing along the ridge from the west. Freedom and Strong soon emptied the wagon. Hancey thrust four revolvers into his belt and clutched one in his hand as some thirty Indians strung out in a long line preliminary to riding up the slope. Sam saw his father collapse at the end of the wagon, hit in the side by a spent ball. Hancey seized Ruth and kissed her hurriedly and tossed her over the tailboard where Strong senior already had been placed by his son. Bracket, helped by his wife although he could walk well enough, climbed into the wagon. Freedom, carrying the double barrel shotgun, took his position in the end of the wagon. Mrs. Bracket gave her husband a thirty-six and kept one for herself. Nancy stood staring at the slowly lengthening line of Indians, while Sam, now holding the horses, yelled for her to mount the seat.

"Up with you, Nance!" shouted Hancey. "You and Sam must take this outfit through to the Kansas line." He was mounted now and his spirited horse was mincing and dancing.

"And you?" she screamed.

"Tagging along. Where's Blackie?"

As none answered he wheeled his horse and rode to the south side of the soddy. Blackie was not there. He raced back as the wagon was jerked ahead at frantic pace, the horses galloping under the cracking lash and making for the freight road. Then he discovered Blackie, a quarter of a mile northwest of the soddy and in the act of flinging himself on to one of Strong's horses.

"And I can't chase him!" he groaned.

He dismissed his hate and turned his quick mind to the new situation. The frightened horses were galloping hard. Sam was swinging and cracking the whip. Nancy was leaning from the seat, a big colt half raised, ready for the first red rider to come alongside the wagon. Freedom was in the end of the wagon, the double barrel shotgun ready.

Hancey rode at an easy gallop, keeping some distance behind the swaying

vehicle. He now gave his attention to the long line of the enemy. The Sioux, not knowing which direction the wagon would take, were coming up the slope on a front that extended a quarter of a mile west of the soddy and but a short distance to the east of it. They had logically reasoned that the whites would make for the nearest place that promised any possible defense, or the Kiowa stage station.

The bulk of the warriors were in position to overhaul or intercept the wagon when it turned to the west. The few warriors east of the soddy were supposed to be enough to kill one or both of the wagon horses did the wagon turn down the road. That the Indians believed they had the game as good as in the bag was shown by their lack of haste.

HANCEY grasped the significance of this maneuver and raced along beside the wagon and called out to Sam:

"Head 'em straight for the road. They think you're driving west."

Then he dropped back and took his time to stare yearningly toward the west, where a rapidly diminishing figure, pursued by three warriors, marked the mad efforts of Blackie to escape his red foes. The soddy by this time was smoking at the windows and door and through the roof, but did not burn except where the buried roof poles were searched out by the fire and smoldered until eaten in two. When this happened patches of sun baked sods dropped to the earthen floor.

The Indians topped the ridge, riding easily and shouting ferociously. Hancey held his mount down to a prancing walk, dividing his attention between the Sioux and the wagon.

Sam cracked the whip and yelled to the frightened horses. The wagon swayed and bumped with the road but a few rods ahead. On the left the end of the line was racing to gain the road. It was obvious that the wagon could turn to the west and pass most of the riders. It was equally plain that the Sioux welcomed such a maneuver, for the tip of the line could easily block the flight to the Kiowa station.

The wagon entered the road on a short diagonal and made for the east. A signal was screamed by the riders behind Hancey and was rapidly relayed from warrior to warrior to the west. The west end curved in abruptly, the whole line, with the exception of the men east of the soddy, pivoting on the smoking structure. The bulk of the Sioux were a quarter of a mile in the rear. A dozen were riding desperately to cut in ahead of the frightened horses. Hancey held his horse down to keep abreast of the wagon and rode half way between it and the fringe of Sioux racing to intercept it. Now that Sam had the horses in the road he was making better speed.

Hancey patted his horse's arched neck, as the nearest braces opened an ineffectual fire on him, and said:

"If this is our last ride, Faro, we must make it a good one. Do your damndest!"

With that he crouched low and, guiding the intelligent animal with his knees, he swooped down like a hawk on the Sioux nearest him. The maneuver took the enemy by surprise, although they were quick enough to go over the sides of their ponies. They fired on him from under their ponies' necks, the bullets going wild. Withholding his fire until within easy range of the nearest pony, he threw down a gun and sent a heavy ball through the animal's neck. Down went the pony, pinning his rider by the leg. A man dismounted was as much out of the fight as if he were dead, so long as the wagon kept the lead. Without a glance at the fallen brave Hancey bore down on the next in line.

This man was a Cheyenne who had elected with several of his tribe to raid east of Kearny with the Sioux. He wore a a long war bonnet with small buffalo horns on each side and a war shirt of deerskin. He carried a small shield with a bunch of sage tied to the lower edge. It was a medicine shield and had been smoked in burning sage to make it impenetrable to a bullet.

Possessing this and believing himself to

be invulnerable, the man rode erect. The drum would be sounded for his capture of the white man's horse. It would be sounded for his capturing the white man's guns and a third time for the white man's scalp. He reined about to meet Hancey and, while advancing on a swift run, he leaned down to his left and swept the shield over the grass.

Then he held it up to the sun; then he presented the surface toward the white man to blind him. The heavy bullet passed through the shield and the owner's heart, and Hancey was riding on to overhaul the next in line before the long headdress hit the ground.

These two encounters had taken place in the space of seconds. All guns in range of the white man opened fire on him. The third man went over his pony and changed his course to ride parallel to the road and overtake his companions ahead of him. Faro, having tasted war, was now putting the Indian ponies to shame. His twinkling legs rapidly cut down the distance and his master commenced shooting alternately with his left and right hands.

The nearest pony was hit and swerved to gallop madly down the slope to the river, his rider over the left side with only the toe of his moccasin showing. Almost coincident with his withdrawal from the chase a big Sioux, wearing a Lincoln-Hamlin campaign medal between his shoulders, went flying spread-eagle to the ground, shot twice through the back before death could unseat him.

Ferocious screams of rage were sounded by those behind Hancey. Those ahead were too much concerned by their danger to waste breath in shouting. Those in the lead to cut off the wagon now realized the lone rider must be disposed of and the chase left to the few Sioux racing down the road. From the swaying wagon a rifle was fired, and a brave was hurled violently to the ground as his mount collapsed with a broken leg.

The fire continued from the end of the wagon, and the Sioux in the road took to the grass on each side and rode far apart. Sam was quick to note the turning back of the Indians, who had been about to block the road, and he groaned aloud at the hopelessness of Hancey's situation. He handed the lines to Nancy and emptied a revolver at the men swirling back to surround Faro and his master.

Hancey dropped his empty guns and drew two from his belt and rode full tilt at the center of the half circle of advancing ponies. The heavy detonations of the guns seemed to be a continuous roar. Never had he shot more quickly or more deadly. He blasted a hole through the line and plunged to pass through it. The man nearest on his right opened his mouth to sound his war cry and at distance of six feet threw forward his rifle and fell backward with the top of his head shot off before he could pull the trigger.

Almost instantly the man on Hancey's left slid head first to the ground and entered the long trail to the Land of Many Lodges. Faro was now clear of the two short segments and, obedient to his rider's knee, he whirled and gallantly made for the road along the front of the advancing Sioux. The turning back of those about to head off the wagon now resulted in all the Sioux being on Hancey's left. While Sam had been frantically lashing his horses along the very edge of life he now was enjoying a comfortable lead and for the first time since flight he believed he would take the wagon through to safety.

Ruth, staring at the tragic scene through the end of the wagon, wondered at the greatness of spirit that held her lover racing along the face of the foe.

"God bless him!" she moaned.

HANCEY knew he had about played his last card. Thinking only of his friends and sweetheart, he remained indomitable to finish two pieces of work: to kill as many of the enemy as he could and to kill himself when he could fight no longer. He shot with deadly accuracy at the ponies, and found himself recalling his first practise at shooting from a moving horse.

One of the Sioux, nearest the road, suddenly shot ahead of the others and, instead of wheeling to block Hancey's progress, kept on in pursuit of the distant wagon. Whether he was actuated by fear of the terrible fighting machine behind him, or was intent on attaining great honor by overtaking the wagon and crippling the horses, became a matter to be discussed by ghosts.

While Freedom might have been able to stop this man, Hancey would take no chances. Ignoring the warrior nearest him for the moment, he brought down his right gun and sent the bullet through the brave's body, killing him. Then he was emptying the gun in his left hand at those almost upon him. He rode desperately to gain the road, using his fifth and last weapon.

In the back of his head he was carrying the thought of self-destruction. He must never be taken alive. He gained by a powerful burst of speed and cocked the gun for the last time and held it ready to use on himself. Now the warriors knew he was all but powerless, and with one exception, they pressed forward, each intent on counting coup by striking him with the bare hand. One man, with white feathers tied to his rifle, took up the chase after the wagon. Reining suddenly, Hancey slipped off his horse and slapped him violently and yelled for him to go. Dropping on one knee he brought down the gun and fired on the pony in the road, and the next second a blow on the head knocked him unconscious.

IT WAS night when Hancey opened his eyes, and his head pained him horribly. He saw flames and his next sensation was the aroma of a wood fire. As the fog rose from his brain he beheld a man squatting close by him. The man wore leggings and moccasins. From the waist up he was naked and thickly painted. His chest was covered with interlined circles of black, red and green. His face was a gridiron of bars in the same colors. He was smoking a white man's tobacco in a white man's pipe.

For a few moments Hancey stared at him dully; then he was recalling the flight and his mad fight. He attempted to move and discovered that he was tightly bound. Soul nausea overwhelmed him. The last he had seen of the wagon was when it was swaying far down the road. He rolled his eyes in a terrible fear of beholding his friends.

The man removed his pipe and grinned sardonically. He remarked:

"Waking up, eh? You're in a hell of a fix. Been better if you'd turned that renegade half-breed over to us."

"Three reasons why we couldn't," Hancey replied faintly. "He was a fighting man and was helping us. You'd stick to no bargain you made. And I'd planned to kill him myself if we both got clear of the soddy."

"That's all behind you. Oughter done for him while you had the chance. Now your luck's hogged out."

"I'll land him yet," muttered Hancey.

The man stared as if not understanding; then his painted features grew more grotesque as he grinned at the prisoner.

"I s'posed you'd woke up. Seems you're still dreaming. If you overtake that half-breed, it'll be in hell."

"They won't kill me," stubbornly insisted Hancey, although a terrible fear was filling his soul.

The man smiled grimly.

"They'll try their hardest not to kill you. And that's what's going to make it bad for you—to keep on living. You oughter see what they done to folks up the river. Folks who just squealed'n run and never made any fight. And we was in a hurry, too. Then think what they'll do to you. You've killed Sioux and Cheyenne men. Wounded some. Same for their war ponies. They'll take lots of time for you. That's why you're alive now. Just waiting for the crowd to get here."

"You're a white man."

"No! I'm White Killer."

"You're a white man and you hate Blackie almost as much as I do. We have two things in common—white birth; hate of the same man."

"Quit your foolish notions. I'm White Killer and I've killed whites. You stand a better show of getting the devil to help you than to git help from me."

"Cards seem to be against me. Let it go that way. Blackie will live longer on account of my cashing in."

White Killer rolled over on his face and went to sleep. Hancey could make out other silent forms. Sentinels were on duty, and at short intervals a man would come to the prisoner and examine his hands and feet to make sure that he had not loosened the thongs. Suffering from the tight cords, a splitting ache in the head, and dreading the ordeal of misery he knew he must pass through to win peace in death, Hancey passed a terrible night.

Shortly before sunrise the scouts came in and others took their places. Fires were rekindled under kettles. The morning light permitted Hancey to recognize the ridge across the river, and he knew the camp was on the south bank of the Little Blue and near the scene of his capture. There was no other prisoner so far as his limited range of vision could discover.

An Indian called out in Teton Sioux. White Killer sat up and answered him. The Sioux spoke again and Killer, having replied, yawned widely and told Hancey:

"Big Elk's asking if you come to your senses. I told him you're wide awake and prime for the skinning knives."

"They won't kill me," insisted Hancey, and all the time he was wondering how he could kill himself.

White Killer laughed. A tall Indian whom Hancey correctly took to be Big Elk came to him and stirred him with his foot and stared down at him. He talked in a low guttural voice to the Killer, saying:

"This white man is very brave. He is a great warrior. He is *wakan* with the fast shooting guns. He must be fed and given water. He must get his strength back so he will die bravely. Untie his hands and feet. Let him lean against the tree with a cord around his waist."

White Killer propped Hancey in a sitting position against a willow and removed the cords from his wrists and ankles. For a bit the numbness of his limbs persisted. By the time the blood was circulating again a warrior, sent by Big Elk, brought some half boiled beef and a pail of water. The man had a bloody furrow across his chest.

He patted Hancey's shoulder as if to reassure him; but even if White Killer's evil smile had not warned the prisoner this act was meant to give a sense of security so that this mental suffering would be the greater when put to the torture, the glaring eyes of the Indian warned him. However, he made himself eat of the meat and he was ravenous for water.

SIOUX warriors, single and in couples, commenced riding into the temporary camp. There was much staccato shouting of news by these men. When Hancey finished eating and drinking he was released from the tree and roughly thrown on a pony and a thong was tightly passed from ankle to ankle. His hands were again tied at his back, and the band ran to their ponies and rode in the direction of the Elk.

White ranged alongside the prisoner and patted Hancey's revolvers, three of them, thrust through his belt.

"Mine, for being first to place a hand on you," he explained.

"You'll never live to kill so many with them as I killed," replied Hancey.

"Still trying to bluff," sneered Killer. "Keep it up when Big Elk gives the word to take off your gay clothes."

"My luck's with me," stoutly declared Hancey, fighting to keep down the soul-sickness. "Why do we ride for the Elk?"

"That's where we'll bag the soldiers they're sure to send down here from Kearny. They can't out trick old Spotted Tail. Armed freighters and settlers will chip in. We'll git 'em to chase us down to the Republican, where we can settle their hash right."

"How long will we stay on the Elk?"

"Depends. If more Cheyenne men join us and want to see a white man die along of the men they've lost, we'll stick there

as long as we can keep you alive."

"What if you're attacked while having your fun?"

"Then your luck will be running good. Have to kill you and 'tend to the fighting."

With that the Killer rode ahead and took his place beside Big Elk.

A young buck had brought word that armed freighters were coming, after seeing the two trains camped near the Kiowa stage station. The band was in haste to reach the Elk before being attacked. It was a false alarm, as no white men were seen. White Killer's talk had given Hancey a faint hope that a smashing attack would be made and that the Indians would have to be contented with simply killing him.

Swinging his gaze to include the long strung out line of Indians, Hancey had the great satisfaction of knowing that his friends had escaped this particular band. The Sioux were remembering his marksmanship, as evidenced by the malignant glances he encountered every time he raised his head to glance at the men.

White Killer dropped back to ride beside him. Hancey asked—

"How many of them did I get?"

"You got plenty. You'll die for each man shot. Oh, they'll take good care of you. They plan to take you down to the Republican where they can take time and do themselves proud. If you'd been a common prisoner they'd took you apart before quitting the Little Blue. You'd been better off if you'd never been born."

"You're worse than any Indian, for you were born white."

"Man ain't what he's born. He's what he lives. I'm red. I always liked Injuns better'n white folks. Damn the whole white race!"

The man was indescribably loathsome. Any Indian was a heroic figure by comparison. Hancey tried to touch him on his superstitious side. He said—

"Early this morning I dreamed you were lying dead on the ground."

"Like hell you did!" cried the Killer.

Hancey knew he had scored.

"You were dead. Killed," added Hancey.

"Every one's got to die sometime. When I go, I want to go quick."

"My dream didn't show how you went. It was all over for you when I saw you on the ground."

"Then it means I'm to die before you do. That's a damn lie of a dream! If it's proved a lie it can't never come true."

"How can you prove it's a lying dream?" asked Hancey.

White Killer showed his teeth in a grin and answered:

"By gitting Big Elk to finish you at the Elk. I'll play on his name. I'll tell him I dreamed of an Elk coming to the Elk, and saw Elk ghosts asking for your life. If dreams are going to be dreamed, I'll have a smart one to tell."

Hancey dropped his head and the Killer fell back to the end of the line. His experiment threatened to shorten his already brief lease on life. Soon White Killer and the big man with the ghastly wound across his chest raced by to ride beside Big Elk. The Killer grinned knowingly at Hancey.

Guiding his pony a few feet to one side by knee pressure Hancey saw the two men riding beside Big Elk. The killer was gesturing as he talked. Hancey believed the renegade was already telling his dream, having first told it to the big Sioux. A young brave rode up to Hancey and struck the pony with his bow to send him back into the irregular line.

At the end of ten bone racking miles the band halted as several Sioux came riding toward them. These men brought good news, from the red point of view. A large number of Sioux and Cheyennes was in camp at the old Fort Riley crossing on the Elk. Already considerable plunder had been taken there. One of the newcomers wore a woman's silk bonnet. After a brief halt, travel was continued, and those who were best mounted raced one another to the camp.

Big Elk and White Killer kept back with the more seasoned warriors who were guarding the prisoner. Badly wrenched

and shaken by his ride, Hancey was glad when they made the camp. The bridge was gone at the crossing, but the creek was dry. On the north side were Indian ponies and a score of horses taken from ranches and stage stations. The ponies roamed at will, but the horses were side-hobbled, or secured to long picket ropes.

WHEN Hancey's ankles were untied and he was pulled from his mount he could not stand. Young bucks were racing their ponies wildly through the camp, and, after rolling to one side to keep out of the path of these, Hancey for a bit forgot his plight sufficiently to take note of his surroundings. If, by some miracle, he could reach the horses across the creek he would ask no more of luck, or fate.

There was a large herd of cattle grazing south of the camp and the young men began shooting arrows at these, causing a loud bellowing. Those running clear of the herd were shot down and butchered for the kettles. Many of the animals were wantonly killed. White Killer paused before Hancey long enough to say—

"We'll kill a couple of cows for every buffalo killed by the whites."

Hancey had no talk for him this time. The tragic happenings of the last three days were being brought home to him in the form of silk cloaks tied around copper waists. One man had some earrings tied to his scalp lock. Others had loot, taken from isolated ranches and trains, strung across their chests and tied to the necks and tails of their ponies. And there were scalps. As it grew dark and the fires were fed to throw off more light these sad trophies were danced.

Hancey was given no supper that night and was glad to be forgotten. Nor did White Killer hunt him up to torture him with pictures of his impending fate. Despite the hopelessness of it all he slept some during the night. Fingers fumbling at his bonds aroused him at regular intervals; then he would sleep again. Toward morning his mind took up the story he had told to White Killer and in his dream he rejoiced at beholding the monster dead on the ground at his feet.

The morning brought much bustling and seeming confusion. The kettles were set to boiling early and some of the elders, including Big Elk, withdrew and held a council. As a result of their decision some of the men hurriedly fished out pieces of meat from the kettles and secured their ponies and rode toward the Little Blue Station, some four miles to the northwest. White Killer went with this band and Hancey was glad to see him depart. After the clamor occasioned by their departure had ceased, a man with a white hand painted on his chest brought Hancey some meat and water.

After Hancey had eaten and satisfied his thirst his hands were tied and he was left alone. The camp now was very quiet and the fires died down to coals. Scouts were thrown out to the north and east. At midday cold meat and water were brought to the prisoner by the man with the white hand. Hancey pointed to his ankles and in pantomime asked to be allowed the freedom of his legs.

The man did not appear to hear him, but retied his hands and left him. He talked briefly with Big Elk and returned and surprised the prisoner by releasing both hands and feet. Before leaving him, he drew the edge of his hand across his throat in what Hancey took to be a warning for him not to attempt to escape.

With mounted men posted between him and the Little Blue, lacking both weapons and arms, and with the whole country swarming with hostiles, Hancey knew escape to be impossible. Yet the thought of escape was ever to the front of his mind. He did not attempt to wander from the kettles and spent much of his time at the foot of the tree to which he had been tied. Three more days passed with nothing happening except as small bands of Sioux came up from the Republican and after a brief halt hurried on to the Little Blue.

During this period of waiting, Hancey was ignored. Each night he was securely bound, but was released in the morning. He went to a kettle and took meat. He

was free to wander about the camp. To all appearances he was as inconspicuous as a ghost.

He accepted this treatment as a subtle means of increasing his mental torment. Did it lull him into a belief his danger was over, his captors would be all the more pleased. Not for a moment did he imagine he could pass beyond the edge of the camp without being seized and bustled back to his tree and tied.

Men gave him the path without appearing to see him. They turned their backs on him and continued their conversation. That they had eyes in the back of their heads was shown by a little incident on the second day of his seeming freedom. He had gone to a kettle to fish out a piece of beef and, after securing a very large piece, he reached for a butcher knife to cut off a portion.

Instantly a hand closed about his wrist and gave it a twist that made him grunt with pain. The knife dropped on the ground and remained there. The man who had deprived him of it continued his talk. Carrying several pounds of meat Hancey returned to his tree.

The effect of the three days of this sort of freedom only served to heighten his fears. When trussed up so tightly as to impair circulation he measured it a great comfort to be released from his bonds long enough to eat. Freed from physical pain his mind was ever brooding on what would happen when the Sioux announced a holiday.

There was also the great fear of being compelled to witness the torture of some other prisoner. Each time a band of horsemen rode whooping into camp he dreaded lest they be bringing a man or woman. Each time he was left weak by the reaction.

Late in the afternoon of his third day of freedom of the camp the quiet of the place was transformed into a bedlam. Two bucks on lathered ponies rode from the direction of the Little Blue Station screaming like madmen. With glittering eyes the warriors gathered to hear the news, and Hancey found himself surrounded.

The ponies came to a plunging halt by the first kettle, and one of the riders shouted dramatically. The assemblage at once became delirious with joy. The uproar continued until several wagons appeared, drawn by half crazed horses. As they drew near many of the men went forward to meet them. The tops were riddled with arrows and torn by bullets. They were brought across the creek and halted on the west side of the camp.

Screaming and shouting, the Indians swarmed over and through them and began hurling the contents out on the grass. Several of the Indians arriving with the wagons had bottles of whisky tied to their wrists. They would drink from these and then hurl the bottle to the ground. This reckless waste of liquor was understood by Hancey when a man knocked the head from a bottle and with grotesque dancing steps offered a drink to a fresh scalp tied to his pony's bridle, and then flung the bottle from him and pointed to a twenty gallon can a man was rolling over the side of the wagon. Shrieking terrifically, the onlookers pointed to the can and shouted to each other that the wagon was filled with big kettles of liquor.

HANCEY believed luck had cracked against him for the last time and he glanced furtively about for a chance to run and be killed. He found himself staring into the vicious eyes of a big brave. Others were watching him in quiet exultation. He faced about and with assumed indifference watched the mad antics of those unloading the cans.

Shouts of laughter drew attention to another wagon where half a dozen young men were emptying bags of flour on each other. Besides the flour there were large amounts of groceries, originally intended for the Denver markets, and as these were thrown from the wagons the kettles were set to boiling for a big feast. Their plethora of supplies lifted the warriors to a wild ecstasy.

Half a dozen men raced down on the cattle herd and began wounding and slaying. Here was meat and bread and sugar

and canned goods and much whisky. Those who preferred rum rations above all else set to work hacking holes in the big cans. Once an unlimited supply of strong drink was accessible, Hancey knew his days of grace were ended.

A can was opened at last and a man dropped on his knees and eagerly sucked up a mouthful. In the next moment he was spluttering and leaping about as if crazy. Another man investigated and kicked over the can. Another picked it up and with a howl of rage hurled it toward the men surrounding Hancey.

Hancey exclaimed—

"Thank God it's coal oil!"

The man at his side struck him in the face, splitting his lips. As the others realized there was no cargo of liquor they fell on the cans and vented their rage by hacking them open with their axes. A few of the more canny ran to the dry creek bed and hunted for the discarded bottles. It was the sight of the scattered cans and the large area of oil soaked ground that inspired Hancey with a wild hope of at least attempting escape. While he was trying to capture the nebulous suggestion that his mind was trying to form, shouts of joy and wild laughter shifted the mood of the band.

A big box, containing drygoods, had been torn open. A man on a pony leaned down and seized the loose end of a great bolt of calico and galloped south from the camp, leaving the bolt bobbing and revolving on the ground. This was the signal for others to do likewise, and the situation, in another setting, would have been extremely ludicrous to Hancey, as a dozen long cloth ribbons criss-crossed each other and caused rare tangles. Hancey was startled by a voice directly behind him saying—

"This is the man."

He turned and beheld White Killer, who was half drunk, and a one eyed man, a white man or a breed. The latter, wearing leggings, was painted for war. He stared at Hancey thoughtfully and said—

"He killed many, you say?"

"Eight or ten and wounded some. He's done us more damage, Bent, than all the Little Blue Valley bunched together."

The man turned away, saying:

"He's unlucky he didn't kill himself. They'll take him to the Republican?"

"I hope not. Big Elk planned that. But here's the place. Cheyenne men are here. The Hawk and others will be coming in. They lost two men by his guns. They won't want to wait till we make the Republican before seeing him paid off. Wish you'd speak to Big Elk about it."

They passed on, the Killer urging that the prisoner be put to the torture before the camp was moved, George Bent listening and saying nothing. Hancey again regretted the dream he had improvised for the Killer to fear. And yet, as he stared at the scattered cans of coal oil, a flickering of hope persisted in animating him.

Possibly the pendulum would have swung to this extreme even if no wagons of loot had been brought in, as constant application to one plane of thought can persist only for a certain length of time. This tiny hopefulness was quickly followed by fear lest a blazing brand be thrown among the cans. Thereat he discovered a possible way of throwing the camp into confusion, during which he might find a chance to run. He watched anxiously. If the Indians knew the oil was inflammable they did not show it.

Their bitterness at being cheated out of unlimited liquor was changing to general merriment over the variety and quantity of foodstuffs. They were variable as children in their moods. Large quantities of cloth which their squaws would have rejoiced to receive were left scattered over the grass. Could Hancey's vision have reached the Little Blue station it would have beheld some two hundred wagons, forming the Constable train, wrecked, and their contents scattered over the ground. A great amount of liquor in cases and barrels was on this train.

While the feast was being prepared, some of the men who had brought the loot to the camp remembered that more liquor than a tribe could drink was only

four miles away. They announced their intention of going after a supply.

The rejoicing increased. Fresh ponies were provided. Bent found Big Elk and questioned the wisdom of much liquor. He warned that soldiers would surely be sent out from Fort Kearny and that the Indians should keep their heads clear. White Killer, desiring more drink, declared that the soldiers were welcome and would remain for all time wherever they came upon his brothers, the Sioux. Big Elk glanced about at his expectant followers and replied that only Spotted Tail could refuse them liquor.

If soldiers came from Kearny the camp would be moved toward the Republican, and once the white men followed him a few miles he would turn on them and kill every man. His men had their mouths open for whisky, and a night of drinking could be enjoyed without any danger from the stricken valley. In other words he was powerless to come between his followers and their ferocious lust for drink.

HANCEY returned to his tree, wondering when he should attempt to escape. He tried to efface himself from the Indians' notice. None gave him any attention. He threw himself on the ground, convinced he could not move twelve feet outside the camp without being pounced upon. He commenced to watch the sun. The camp would be an inferno after liquor arrived and darkness fell. He feared that his captors would suddenly decide to tie his hands and feet and he tried to oust the thought from his mind lest his stressing it would suggest it to the red men. The he returned to worrying about the cans of oil. If by accident it should be set afire before night came the resulting confusion would serve him but poorly. Whatever his mind touched upon was food for fear.

It was a positive relief to behold White Killer, half drunken, coming toward him and dragging some poles for a teepee. On the poles were the dressed and painted skins to serve as the covering. There were no other shelters in the temporary camp and Hancey was puzzled. The Killer dropped the poles a short distance from the prisoner and announced:

"Going to put up a little medicine tent and change my paint. No devil's dream's going to put me out of the game. I feel *wakan*. You'd never had that dream if I'd made a little feast for my medicine. Tonight will see it have the strength of a buffalo bull and the cunning of a crow. Come on me mighty sudden just what sort of a feast my medicine needs."

He paused and grinned. Hancey made no reply, although he was guessing what the renegade would say next.

The Killer continued:

"Needs you. Come to me like a flash after I'd chewed on it. Bent spoke right when he said you oughter saved a bullet for your own head."

"My friends seemed to need the last shot more than I did. And a man is slow to give up hope."

"There's no nope for you. But the more you hope the better the Sioux'll like it. They're just playing with you. They act like they've forgotten you. But some one is watching every move you make and you can't catch a man looking at you."

He paused and started to pick up the poles, then faced about and with a drunken leer continued:

"Just wait till some of our Cheyenne friends come. The Hawk fetched word a small band's coming to have a hand in the fun. The young bucks will soon be bringing plenty of rum from the Little Blue station. With visitors and rum it'll be a bad time for the prisoners."

"Prisoners?" repeated Hancey. "I'm the only prisoner."

The Killer was much amused.

"Just keep it in mind it's going to be a bad night for the two of you."

Hancey wet his swollen lips and huskily asked—

"Who's the other one?"

The Killer shook his head and laughed aloud. He was much pleased. Again he turned away, but he could not resist

inflicting more pain. He wheeled with staggering steps and informed:

"Old friend of yours coming soon. Be here any minute."

"Good God! Who?" faintly gasped Hancey, the sweat standing on his forehead.

"That gits home," chuckled the Killer. "Just one of your friends in the big soddy."

Hancey's nerve quite deserted him. He had believed his own plight to be more than he could endure, and now his troubles were doubled. The Killer fussed with the poles without accomplishing anything. Hancey found himself panting for breath. If either the girls were a prisoner— He could only wish she would die before she was brought into the camp. He rolled over on his face and bit his swollen lips to prevent an outcry. White Killer stared at him and decided he was indifferent. Intent on jolting him into some show of feeling he explained—

"It's Blackie."

"What?" sharply cried Hancey, flopping to a sitting position, his eyes radiant.

"They caught him near the Narrows after they'd killed the Eubanks family. As his mother was a Cheyenne and as he murdered a woman of that tribe, the Sioux have saved him to turn over to the Cheyennes. Being part red he'll probably be more game than you be."

Hancey mopped the sweat from his forehead and felt strangely at peace. He had feared it was Ruth or Nancy. That would have been a worse hell than any theologian had ever invented. He lifted his voice in song, singing "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower."

White Killer teetered back and forth and gaped at him in amazement. The Sioux turned their heads and looked in his direction. Big Elk came through the camp until he could glimpse the recumbent figure, the hands loosely clasped at the back of his neck. He told a Cheyenne man:

"He is very brave. He will die very brave. A son like him would make a man's heart very light."

THE SONG finished, Hancey kept quiet, already regretting that he had attracted attention. The White Killer picked up the poles and dropped one. After several clumsy efforts he voiced a string of oaths and snarled at Hancey—

"You singing bird, hop up here and lend a hand."

"Go to hell, you cheap renegade," Hancey serenely replied.

The Killer fairly choked in an attempt at a reply and fumbled at his belt for one of the prisoner's guns. Like a shadow an Indian stood behind him and held his hands away from the weapons. He spoke in a low tone to the unfuriated man and released him.

The Killer was not too drunk to ignore the man's warning. He again picked up the poles, only to drop all of them and to face the crossing as a series of sharp yells on the north side of the creek was answered with yelping cries by the few men idly watching the pony herd. As the yelling drew nearer the camp replied with a chorus of exultation. Hancey could make nothing of it, but the Killer's mind, although benumbed by drink, interpreted it precisely, and rejoiced:

"They're fetching him in! This will be a fine night! All they need is rum, and the ground is covered with it at the Little Blue station. It'll be Sioux against Cheyenne, to see who can keep a man alive the longest! But Blackie's part red and will beat you, singing bird!"

The screaming and shouting of the warriors reached an explosive climax as a band of mounted men rode across the dry bed of the creek and into the camp. It ceased as abruptly as if a knife had cut it off. Hancey was on his feet, and one of the first men he saw was Blackie lashed across a pony like a dead man. Sioux and Cheyennes pressed eagerly forward as the lashings were cut. The half-breed fell heavily to the ground.

Some of the Indians would have kicked him in the face as he remained prostrate, waiting for his benumbed limbs to awaken, if the more seasoned warriors had not interfered. Blackie was helped to his feet.

His captors danced around him, derisively snapping their fingers in his face and threatening his eyes with the points of their knives.

Murderer and an outcast from two bloods, he at least did credit to his maternal ancestry. The small eyes refused to blink. Dried blood on his chest and back told of knife slashes. He met the scowling, grimacing gaze of his captors with no show of concern. He worked his legs and arms until circulation was fully restored and then pushed several men out of his way and walked toward Hancey. His indifference was approved by those who were most eager to put him to the torture.

Big Elk harangued the men, and the threatening and yelling ceased. Young bucks mounted their ponies and took up positions around the camp. Warriors, taking their ease in the camp proper while the evening meal was cooking, formed another circle around the prisoners. Blackie, like Hancey, was free to walk where he would so long as he did not attempt to penetrate the inner circle. He chose to remain near Hancey. He stolidly said—

"Wish now you'd shot me at the big soddy."

"They'll kill you after the whisky arrives from the Little Blue station."

"Perhaps. There's no question about them killing you. We met the bucks going for the whisky. They told about you. They think you're a big fighting man and a big prize. Little reckoned, when we was with Tisk upon the South Loup, we'd finish like this."

Hancey's thin face hardened and his eyes half closed as he replied:

"It was only by a hair you got away from me then. If I'd known the truth when I had my chance neither of us would be here tonight. If I must go through with it, I'm glad you must feed out of the same dish."

"By God! They ain't tied me over a wagon wheel yet to be skinned alive," muttered Blackie, his fierce eyes glowing.

Then he saw White Killer standing by and grinning through his paint. Blackie called out to him:

"Save your grins. They ain't cooked my bacon yet. I have friends among the Cheyennes who'll stand by me."

The Killer picked up a teepee pole and all but fell on his face. Regaining his balance he hoarsely corrected:

"Stand by while you're being unj'inted. It's going to be a busy night."

Blackie eyed him thoughtfully, his beady eyes glancing from the heavy eyes to the painted skins and poles. Then he slowly advanced and said:

"Putting up a medicine lodge, eh? Well, I'd rather make myself useful than to stand still and hate myself."

He picked up the poles and set to work as one who understood the knack of pitching a teepee. The Killer scowled heavily at first, then approved as he saw he was to be spared the difficult task. He said:

"Asked t'other one and he told me to go to hell!"

"He's proud," grunted Blackie, working rapidly.

White Killer chuckled and attempted to help with the work. Hancey paced to the nearest fire and back to the tree. No one appeared to be giving him any attention except as men would politely step aside and permit him to pass; and yet, whenever he turned, several naked warriors were ever close at hand.

The first evening shadows were blurring the pony herd across the creek when the dressed skins were hung in place on the poles. They appeared a spectral white, except for the medicine symbols. As Hancey returned to his tree Blackie crawled inside the teepee. That he was trying to change the hanging of a skin was shown by the Killer's cursing him for his stupidity.

Hancey heard Blackie reply:

"Do it yourself then, if you know so damned much about it. Reckon I've worked enough."

"You're through with work for a very long time," grunted the Killer, sinking to his knees and starting to crawl through the low opening.

For a moment he appeared to be hesitating, his head and shoulders inside the shelter. The he disappeared.

HANCEY turned back and this time continued to the fire nearest the wagons. Savage eyes curiously watched him, but he walked with head bent far forward and his hands clasped at his back. It was rapidly growing dark and he knew that if he were to enjoy the mercy of being quickly killed he could wait no longer to bolt from the camp and fight to the death when overtaken.

He halted at the kettle and fished out a piece of beef and pretended to be ravenously hungry. The men around the fire knew this was play acting, but they strongly approved of it. The stouter his spirit the more sport he would afford them once the whisky arrived. The Killer walked by, his head bowed, his legs a trifle unsteady, although concealed by the blanket tied at his waist and sweeping the ground. Hancey recognized him by his drunken gait and the circles of paint on his chest and the bars on his face. A Sioux called out to him and jeered at his uncertain steps. The Killer grunted something in Sioux and turned toward the creek.

A man behind Hancey told a friend—

"He goes to hunt for another bottle in the dry grass."

Hardly was this said when a wild yell was raised from the direction of the small medicine lodge. Some were shouting for men to bring lights. Hancey understood that much when the men behind him roughly bundled him aside and snatched burning fagots from the fire and raced toward the teepee. Lights were being carried there from other fires. Because of the excitement of the moment Hancey's act of taking a blazing brand from under the kettle caused no suspicion for the moment. He had time to leap back and hurl the flaming stick into the oil soaked ground.

If any had comprehended his purpose and thought to seize him, such action was stopped by the phenomenon of a sheet of flame roaring up from the oil covered grass. The effect on the camp was so startling that, coupled with the cause of the shouting at the medicine lodge, not a hand was raised as he ran and jumped into the bed of the creek. Very likely the confusion resulting from the burning oil prevented any one from observing his flight.

The camp stood out brightly illumined as the flames roared upward and reached the open cans. Hancey did not hear any shouting until he was almost across the creek, so benumbed were the Indians. The warriors commenced shouting wildly. Men were running in all directions, but with no purpose. They had not suspected the stuff in the cans would burn.

Bending low, Hancey ran for the east end of the pony herd. The few men on his side of the river were oblivious to everything except the miracle of the ground across the stream bursting in fiery flames. The ponies, frightened by the yelling and the fire, stampeded toward the Little Blue station. The ranch stock were tugging at their pickets. The flames reached the wagons and heaps of groceries by the time Hancey reached a horse.

He had no idea what had caused the first uproar, when lights were called for, but accepted it as an act of Providence. The animal he first reached was a big iron gray. He stood staring at the sheets of flame. Hancey unfastened the long rope and mounted just as west of him and on his side of the creek there rose the yells and shouts of men riding down from the northwest. He saw them galloping for the crossing as he kicked his heels and his mount leaped frantically forward and took a course down the creek.

The horse was running from the noise and the fire, and fortunately the northeast course was the one Hancey would have selected had he had means of guiding the frightened brute.

Hancey could scarcely make it seem real that after touching death he had managed to draw back. Only the heavy steady pounding of the gray's hoofs were real. He passed from sight of the Indians

and the blazing wagons until only a rosy glow over his shoulder marked the spot of his captivity and suffering. The way was dark, for they were racing into the face of night. If the horse were following a path, his rider could not see it. Every stride contained the menace of a stumble and headlong fall.

After two miles of mad running Hancey began to suspect that his mount was following a familiar course and was returning home. Now that he was convinced that the Indians were not on his trail, room was made for another fear—that his blind flight would carry him into the hands of another band of raiders.

The Little Blue, he estimated, could not be more than five miles from the Fort Riley crossing over the course he was following. He doubted whether any station or ranch had survived the general attack and he knew he must find secure cover before daylight. It might be several days before men from Beatrice and other points east of Thayer County, or before soldiers from Fort Kearny, would enter the valley.

His horse slowed down to a walk after reaching the mouth of the creek, and he turned and crossed the stream and traveled slowly along the south bank of the Little Blue. He came to a spring branch he knew must be near the Nuckolls-Thayer County line. His horse halted on the edge of a second growth of ash and commenced grazing. Slipping to the ground he felt his way into this growth and came to a log house. The door of it was open.

Feeling with hands and feet, he soon satisfied himself that it had not been inhabited for some time. The flooring was of poles to keep a tenant above the spring and fall overflow from the branch. He stepped through an opening at one end and dropped three feet. Finding the ground shelved sufficiently to permit his crawling in under the floor, he lost no time in doing so. When he stretched himself out he quickly fell asleep, overcome by physical and nervous exhaustion.

The sunlight was streaming through the doorway of the hut and sending pencils of light into his face when he woke up. Outside, birds were busy in and about the growth, as indifferent as the trees to all they had witnessed since the seventh of August. The buzzards, always looking for death, flew over the valley from all horizons.

Hancey rolled on his side and stared through a chink between the bottom logs. Two feet, toes up, were within a few inches of his eyes. The feet were encased in boots. Shuddering at having spent the night in such close proximity to a dead man, and being unable to see the open ground beyond the growth, he softly crawled to the opening in the floor and stood upright. He remained waist deep in the hole, as he heard a sudden noise outside the door. Crouching until only the top of his head was above the floor he waited and watched.

A booted foot came over the threshold, and Hancey realized the dead man had come to life. A hand showed inside the casing, as if the man had started to enter the deserted house and had paused to look about him. Then the face appeared and Hancey ducked from his sight, his heart thumping loudly, after glimpsing the chest painted in red, green and black circles and the profile striped in as many colors.

TO BE CONTINUED

Chechako Song

By NOEL H. STEARN

HERE I am at the horse's tail,
Fifty-five miles up the Telegraph Trail.
Bacon in the belly,
Bannock in the pan,
Hair on the chest of a hard he-man.

Here I am at the horse's side.
If he gets much pokier I'll offer him a ride,
For I've got ten trout
In my tummy tucked away,
So I feel that I could carry him and damn well may.

Here I am at the horse's neck.
One foot's lame and the other is a wreck,
But I've filed away the flapjacks,
All that I can hold,
And I'm gonta keep agoin' till I get that gold.

Here I am at the horse's head
And I won't stop movin' till he drops down dead.
Beans in the saddlebags,
Belly full of bear,
Don't know where I'm going but I'll get somewhere.

A Duke and a Commoner match wit and courage

Of Gallantry

TO THE hands of the respectable Messer Ugo Valdifiore, treasurer to my good and gracious lord, my Lord Duke of Rometia; these:

Valdifiore:

I TELL thee, it is not well to bait me now; I have four weeping wounds, and my garden hath gone to ruin while I have been away. If any more accountings are demanded of me, I will come cut thine ears off, potbelly.

The number of horses killed under me was indeed four; I am not in the habit of writing IIII to signify one. And the armorer who spent VIII hours, which meaneth eight, taking the dents out of my armor was one Jacopo, who holdeth forth on the Ravenna road, near where we stopped the pursuit. I now remember that he repaired also five links of my chain mail, which addeth to the bill XI soldi (eleven).

I look for an early payment.

—L. CARADOSSO, Captain.

To my most illustrious and excellent lord, His Highness' Grace my Lord Duke of Rometia; from L. Caradosso, a farmer, these:

My lord:

IT WAS welcome, once more to see your Grace's hand of write upon a missive, what though the matter conveyed was severe. This is my first communication from your Highness since the letter summoning me to return to the command of the army. I am aware that your Lordship has been much occupied; I hope the

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE OF MEDIEVAL ITALY

By F. R. BUCKLEY

Author of "The Way of Sinners"

gracious Lady Allegra is well, and not too much distressed by the defeat of her brother's forces. Even the desire to avenge a sister's seduction should not have induced him to charge me with insufficient cavalry.

With regard to the accounts, I will confess frankly that the dead horses were somewhat exaggerated; but it hath always seemed to me that a man who hath had two mounts veritably killed under him, hath probably done enow to be worth the price of two more. As for the armorer, he lies in his throat, and meseems this sending to him, and questioning of him, is unworthy of your Highness' generosity.

It will be remembered that I asked no questions when I was summoned from my retirement, to the utter loss of all my vine crop and eight ells square of most promising salad stuff. Let it also be remembered that my pay was only that of guard captain, though I was commanding an army in the field, and of twice the usual size, counting the levies from Tramoia.

The lady's brother would have paid a good ransom, but it was forbidden to touch him, what though in his youthful heat he struck me twice over the head with a mace.

It is these blows which, by afflicting me presently with a headache, cause me to cease writing; always in the trust that your Grace may continue in joy and prosperity.

I withdraw my accounts. A farmer hath no business with charges and armor. The pleasure of having served your Highness shall suffice me. —L. CARADOSSO

To the same:

Sire:

IT MUST be that my intellect, like my bodily powers, doth desert me in my age; for I can not see the connection between my account for expenses in the campaign and the tale of gallantry which your Grace doth me the honor to command.

Meseems that either my account is righteous and to be paid without condition, or that it is excessive, iniquitous and dishonest, and therefore to be refused outright. It may be, as your Highness avers, that by a slip of the pen I marked fourteen crowns too much for the broken sword; but how is this affected by my ability or failure to tell a story of gallantry?

However, I am in need of the money, and furthermore it doth occur to me that I am a pensioner of your Lordship's Grace, after no more than fifty years of service; so that it is doubtless within my province to supply what amusement as, in my age and condition of rheumatics, I may. I devoutly thank your Grace that the service required of me is not tumbling or the like; and in token of this gratitude, preface my tale with the advice that it be not shown to the Lady Allegra.

Whereas to your Lordship a story of gallantry may seem very fitted to the time and circumstances, it would appear to the lady involved both irrelevant and insulting.

Without attempting explanation of the which, I invoke the protection of God and state that on a midsummer day nigh thirty years ago, we were besieging the city of Cospoli; "we" signifying, not your Highness' father (whom God receive) but the Count of Cospoli, to whom the duke had lent me.

The circumstance was, that the count had been recalled from France by news that his capital city was in revolt, just as my ducal master was setting out for a visit to the French king; so, at a conference of the two nobles, I (to command the count's forces) had been exchanged against a three months' use of the count's hotel in Paris; and I remember the duke's saying laughingly that if I were killed in that service, he would take revenge by destroying some of the count's furniture.

Well, well; there we were, in face of the city, and ready at last to begin the attack. I say at last because the count had been in a mighty hurry to reduce the city and return to France; and the preparations for the siege had accordingly been much delayed. He had not even allowed himself the time to visit his brother, my Lord of Ardizzio, attached as he was to him; they were David and Jonathan, those twain; so that four times the period of a visit was lost in the coming, going and desertion of couriers.

And at last no clear arrangement was come at; we sat down to the siege, knowing only that Bernardo di Ardizzio was coming to our aid—at a date unknown, and with an unstated strength of troops. Of my own responsibility, I sent a messenger to Ardizzio to demand more definite tidings; who returned newsless, save that Bernardo and his force (one hundred guard and what levies he could impress along the road) had already left Ardizzio and had not been seen by the messenger on the direct road from that county to Cospoli.

This last meant (I thought) that Bernardo had wisely taken a roundabout way; first, to gain more time for the augmentation of his force, and second, to avoid the southern length of his brother's domain; which, though not in open revolt like the capital, was seething with discontent.

So I settled in fair comfort to the fulfillment of my count's demands for action; and by the middle of July had the city well invested. I should also have been well advanced with the actual business of taking it (by mining the wall towers) had the affair been left in my hands; but the count had no patience with such sordid business as digging and timbering. He had been brought up to the idea of personal combat; and though—or perhaps because—he was entirely without experience of warfare, to this idea he held.

Once I had him nearly converted to my plans, by the argument that, by avoiding this ignoble brawling with commoners, he would the more surely be present to enjoy the hanging of the survivors after the capture of the town; but the next morning there appeared on the city walls a knight in full armor, directing the defense.

So that I was commanded to recall my sappers, change their shovels for axes (we had no axes nearer than twelve miles) and set them to building a tower on wheels—this tower, to be constructed of tree trunks; eighty feet high and fifteen square; protected against fire by wet hides (we had to slaughter a hundred cattle); and equipped with wheels, stairs, a drawbridge and such complicated machinery.

It was to be built solely in order that the Count of Cospoli could fight single handed with this unknown of his own condition. Meantime, of course—the building took us three weeks—the commerce of the county remained at a standstill, and the crops which my besieging force should have been harvesting, began to rot on the ground.

IT INFLUENCED largely my opinion of the intellect of humanity that, as we sweated over that infernal engine, I was the only one to curse the institution of chivalry.

However, it was finished at last. Now there came the business of moving it up to the walls.

Your Grace, in these days of artillery, will scarce realize what a business was this. There were cannon then; but the haste of our gathering had left us without any; and at best, the guns of those days threw a ball so light as to be useless for breaching. We were to rely, as the folk of three hundred years before had relied, on the catapult, the balista, the rat and the battering ram; with crossbows and long bows to cover our use of the same.

Seeing us with these antique weapons, the Count Rinaldo was wont to laugh consumedly. He had been present at some battles of the French king's, and was acqueynt with the modern way of doing things.

Finding me in my shirtsleeves and all over sweat one afternoon (we were making wheeled mantlets for the advancement of the archers) he spent a half hour describing how Louis had the forms of women both on the breeches of his siege train guns, and in the tents of his general staff.

I assure your Grace that for the time I wished the townsfolk had had culverins.

As it was, endeavoring to reach us with a rock from a wall catapult, they did no more than kill four mantlet makers, including our only one that was a carpenter by trade, and spatter the count with blood from their crushing. The which was a serious affair to him, natheless; because it ruined his best sky blue silk costume, wherein he had planned to visit a lady that same evening.

Twenty-eight he was; very handsome, and gallant to the extreme. By which I would convey to your Highness that he had induced a great number of women to love him, while himself cherishing affection for none in the world save himself and his brother Bernardo.

Where was I?

Yes—the tower.

It is not my intention to divert your Grace with a tale of battles, though such would be more within my powers than one of the sort which hath been demanded of me; so I will state simply that in due time the tower was approached to the walls, the drawbridge lowered (after the defenders' mantlets had been smashed by our catapults) and a force headed by my Lord Rinaldo landed on the patrol walk of the outer enceinte.

There and forthwith, they were met by a mob of townspeople with the unknown knight in the lead; which person, rushing at Rinaldo without courtesy of greeting, or salute, or other sign of love before battle, did incontinently seize the count by the waist and hurl him off the rampart.

It was lucky there was water in the moat; though my lord protested bitterly that he would rather have suffered a

broken neck than have been fished out of the water by bowmen, with a dead dog hanging from his greaves.

"We have lost the whole of the attacking force, and the tower is burning," said I, when at last the gentleman had regained some portion of his calm.

He made no answer beyond bringing forth another pint or so of ditch water; but he struck his servant in the eye for no reason, so that I judged it would be better to withdraw and proceed with mine own plans unauthorized; the which, for a whole week, I did without interference.

The procedure was to drive a tunnel, commencing in a wood some bowshot from the walls, and terminating in a great chamber under the south tower of the city; the said chamber heavily timbered to let it support the weight. When all was ready, the timbers would be fired, and on their burning, down the tower would come, leaving a breach wherethrough we might attack.

I was at the construction of the chamber itself, when the Count Rinaldo came once more upon the scene, gorgeous in scarlet, much comforted though somewhat pale after a week away from camp; and in the highest delight over a dispatch that day received from Bernardo.

"My brother is at Istanza, and should be here within three days," says he, tucking the message into his bosom without motion to show it to me, the commander-in-chief, "and I would fain take the town before his arrival."

"It is not possible," says I, leaning on the shovel I had been using like any soldier. "Even with the Count Bernardo's force to help us, we can not make a well planned attack under a week. The men need to be trained for the storm, and—"

"I am issuing orders, Captain," says the young man, with a stress upon my title and a glance at my filthy estate. "The attack will be made through this mine."

I could not speak. My jaw dropped and would not rise. How I appeared, I could well judge by the similar expression on the face of my sergeant, whom I forthwith knocked down.

"This chamber will be prolonged until it shall extend beyond the walls," says Rinaldo, waving his hand in the evident faith that he was proposing unto me a new invention, "and then by night, the men being drawn up in the tunnel, the ceiling will be broken through, and we shall take the city by surprise. See that it is done."

He gave me a haughty look, to which a near apoplexy prevented reply, and left the chamber.

YOUR Grace, your Grace, how shall I convey to your Highness' mind a conception of this folly? In the first place the tunnel was not a storm tunnel; it was too long and too low; troops passing through it in force would stumble, drop their weapons and arrive in the chamber furious each with the man that had been ahead of him.

Secondly, the chamber had been timbered to support the weight of the tower, so that tree trunks took up seven-eighths of the floor space and made the crossing of the room a matter of skill for one man alone.

Thirdly, since our object had been to undermine the foundations, we were a good thirty feet beneath the surface of the ground; which meant that to break through we should have to tunnel upward for sixty or eighty feet on the diagonal, and that our stormers, having crawled on their bellies through the tunnel and passed the forest of props, would have to go a-mountaineering to deliver their attack.

My sergeant, arising, said that his astonishment had come from his knowledge that, if not the inventor of storming by tunnel, I had at least been a practitioner of the art ere this count had howled farewell to his wet nurse; for which I knocked him down again; and went for a lonely walk among the crossbow bolts and the long shafts of upper air.

I was morose at first, as your Grace may judge; but the freedom and exercise had their effect, and by the fall of dusk I was in a more cheerful frame of mind.

For instance, I could take pleasure in

"Wham!" barked Bolt's six-shooter, and the bullet knocked up dirt beside the man's knee.

With another frantic jerk at the trigger, the driver dropped the empty weapon.

"Come 'ere, you dirty bum!" snarled Bolt.

The man got to his feet and walked shakily away from his gun, as Bolt scowled viciously at him over his six-shooter.

"Get a rope and tie this bird up," said Bolt to Pot.

Pot was grumblingly scrambling off of Joe, whose chest began to heave spasmodically, trying to pump air into his tortured lungs.

"What's the idy?" puffed Pot.

"Get that rope!" Bolt snapped, " 'fore these other guys come to."

Pot picked up the hemp rope that had been tied around Bolt's bed roll, and with one end he bound the man's arms above the elbows behind his back.

Then Bolt took the other end and, by means of half hitches, hogtied Joe and Dopey together.

"Look hayre, Bolt," Pot grumbled. "Holy sufferin' Israelites, this ain't no way to do. We'll get in a jam!"

"Naw, we won't," said Bolt. Then he said to the man standing with his arms bound, "Set down there an' stick your feet out."

Bolt snapped half hitches about his feet, then gave the remaining loop of the thirty foot rope a twist about the brake shoe.

"Listen, Bolt," persisted Pot. "Gosh-all-Friday! I wanted to slap that little smirkin' squirt, but this is too raw!"

"We couldn't get too raw with this bunch!"

Bolt turned to the driver again.

"Use a machine gun on us, would you? An' didn't know how to use it! How long you been in this war? I oughta knock your head off!"

"No—no!" barked Pot, grabbing Bolt's arm. "For the love of Mike, cut it out! Let's pile 'em in the car an' take 'em off some place 'fore somebody comes."

"Let go. Don't you know who they are?"

"It don't matter. They're liable to pop a knot in our tail."

"No, they won't."

Bolt pulled the little oblong of blue cardboard from his slicker pocket.

"Look there! Don't you remember what the deputy said about some guys holdin' up that circus at Tucumcari? An' there's their machine gun an' everything."

Pot looked down at the blue ticket and read:

ADMIT ONE

CALDWELL'S MAMMOTH CIRCUS

"Well, I'll be dad-bobbled!" Pot blurted. "An' here I thought you had really gone nutty! Especially when you crawled under the wagon an' barked at that long legged feller."

"Bark?" growled Bolt. "I didn't bark at nobody. I oughta bark your coco!"

"Didn't you? I thought—what's that burning? Smells like rags."

It was rags. The water had leaked out through the bullet hole in the can and Bolt's shirt was fried to a crisp.

For a time it looked like Bolt was suffering from a cerebral disturbance of a grave and acute nature. He presented all the symptoms of homicidal mania and it was all Pot could do to keep him from beating up the three men with the charred remains of his shirt.

Even when the boys came riding in, Bolt had to be watched. Joe and Dopey had regained consciousness and cringed together in mutual fear of that homicidal idiot. They were greatly relieved when Pete Johnson, the deputy sheriff, came by on his way to Zero and assured them of the protection of the law.

Pete insisted upon Bolt's going to town with him to drive the robber's car. When they were loading the prisoners in the car, Pot overheard Hoop bragging what a fine joke they had on Bolt.

"So," drawled Pot, "there wasn't no

Indian a-tall. You waddies was just loadin' Bolt all the time!"

"Ye-ah. Wasn't it good?" gurgled Hoop. "Me an' Hambone thought that up all by ourselves. I bet ol' Bolt scratched the hide off in places!"

"Hey, Johnson!" yelled Pot. "Wait a minute."

Pot took off his hat and set it on the ground.

"Now, you wise buttons," he growled, "chip in enough to buy Bolt three good shirts. Dig, or you don't eat!"

But the bunch rebelled against their leaders. They made Hoop and Hambone scratch up fifteen dollars which they gave to the deputy sheriff with instructions to buy Bolt three of the best virgin wool flannel shirts in town.

"An' now," Pot said as the cars moved off, "you can climb up an' finish that windmill job for 'im, while I get supper."

THE ARMY IS A SMALL PLACE

by Leonard H. Nason

WHEN I was at Camp Shelby I was in the base hospital for a while. After I'd been all carved up like a cuckoo clock, I appealed to my colonel, and he got me out of there. The last night I was in the ward we were rather crowded, and so two cots were shoved together, and two other soldiers and I slept in this double bed. In the middle of the night I fell between the two beds and nearly broke my neck, but that isn't what I started to tell about.

It was forbidden to smoke in the ward after eight o'clock. Now I was going the next morning, and I wanted to be devilish anyway, I was so tickled at the thought of getting out of that butchery. Well, I lighted a cigaret. It was about ten o'clock, and all the lights were out, but the night-nurse who was in the office must have seen the flare of the match, for pretty quick she came in.

I'd just taken a big drag as she switched on the lights but I ducked the cigaret out of sight. The bed was the one nearest the door, and I couldn't get rid of the lungful of smoke I had, before she was over to the bedside, so I held my breath and feigned sleep. I guess she knew I was the one who was smoking, for she never moved from the bed. I could hear that starched uniform of hers creaking as she breathed. Well, finally I had to let the smoke go, and grin foolishly. I didn't feel very brash, you bet.

"Nason," said she kindly, "you know it's against the rules to smoke after eight o'clock." Then she turned out the lights and beat it.

When I was wounded in the Argonne they took me to Souilly. When I came out of the ether, there was my old friend, the nurse, standing by the bed. We recognized each other at about the same time, but I was still dopey from the ether, and forgot where I was. I thought I was still back in Shelby, I guess.

"I'm not smoking," said I hurriedly. That seemed to be the wrong thing to say, for she began to cry.

She was a good nurse, that girl, and used to make lemonade for me out of lemons she had to buy herself at a franc a throw.

Total assets—one fresh shave and the will to go straight

The Carnival Kid

By EDWARD L. McKENNA

NOBODY on the beach knew who he was, and he was glad no one did. There had been a little disturbance, one night in April, in the town his show was playing, and the next morning the kid wasn't there to bally for his little game with the cute gimmick. No, indeed, he was not there—he was in Peoria, or Danville, or Cairo, or Chicago —wherever it was that the rattler had carried him. Nobody knows except the Kid.

How he got to the beach is not in the books either. It was a long hard road and it must have wound up hill, judging by the blisters on the Kid's hands and by the condition of his clothes. Perhaps his appearance gave him more discomfort than anything else, for he was as clean as a cat naturally and he loved new clothes and bright neckties. When he came up to the Ideal Bathing Pavilion that Sunday morning he had no tie on at all, just the collar of his shirt turned in, but he had achieved a shave somewhere, and before the sun came up, he'd been in the ocean, from some deserted jetty, and with a wary eye for a prowling cop.

He asked old man Papologous for a job, and Pop looked at him, and then up at the sky, and back at him again and told him to come back at nine o'clock and they'd see how the weather was. Back again at nine o'clock he came, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the Greek told him all right, he'd give him two dollars.

Six dollars more came from tips. Tips from the man who broke his key, and from the man who cut his foot and needed

iodine, and from the man who wanted to know where there was a good place to buy a drink.

These special services were good for fifty cents apiece, on the average. The rest of it was for locking, and wringing out suits and bringing more towels, or talcum powder, or shoe horns; and for being generally useful, and not looking exactly like a bath-house locker. The Kid didn't. He looked like a dancer, or an unscarred lightweight, or a rather speedy college boy; or if you happened to know, just like what he was, a kid who'd run away from a good home in Bridgeport at fourteen and followed the carnivals and the tent shows ever since. Up and down, up and down, while the map of the United States unrolled before him, from Norwich to Nashville and from French Lick to Fargo.

Bright and early Monday morning he was around, and Papalogous gave him a job helping his regular man clean up the bath-houses. They were all done by eleven o'clock, and Pop handed him a dollar and a half and told him to beat it. No business on Monday, he said. Bad season, very bad season. Tomorrow good hot day—business better—come around tomorrow.

He came around. Nothing doing. Wednesday, nothing doing. He waited for Sunday—with the remains of his nine dollars and fifty cents.

Sunday it rained.

What a funny thing the rain is, and how it moves the poets! "And the moment after, weep thy girlish tears." "Harpstrings from the sky." "It rains in my heart as it rains in the town."

What do you suppose a day laborer thinks about the rain? He makes five dollars a day. Tex Rickard can take out rain insurance—the laborer can't. And there's the amusement park outfit. They're working on a shoestring, nine out of ten of them, rack-rented to the last rack; they work eleven, twelve, fourteen hours a day; they've got to be showmen all day and all night; they've got to be jovial and polite to roisterers to rowdies, to tough policemen, to drabs, to drunken men.

Then there's Sadie, from the five-and-ten—it's hard to say what Sunday at Coney Island or Rockaway means to her. Arcady, for a guess, with her truck driver being the pursuing faun in the most lifelike manner.

Sadie will stay over in Tenth Street and look down at the wet asphalt. But the people at the shore have to hear music. There's a merry-go-round down the street playing "Down by the Rio Grande," followed by "Dearest, I Love You," and "A Kiss in the Dark," after which, of course, "Down by the Rio Grande" again. Last year's tunes. Reminds you of what you were doing when last year's tunes were new, and who wants to be reminded of that? Over in the College Inn they've got somebody who's banging away defiantly on a seaside piano—"Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie." "Who—stole my heart away, who-o-o-o!"

And the Carnival Kid is sitting under the boardwalk, on last Sunday's New York *American*, listening to the rain patter down above his head. He's doing some thinking. He hates to think. He wasn't meant to think. What he was meant for is something else again.

He's thinking about gasoline torches lighting up a July night in Moline, or Columbia, or Ashtabula, and about the smell of popcorn and hot dogs, and the apple-knockers crowding in with their kicks full of jitneys. And the noise of a little stick banging on a board.

"Well, well, well, folks. Come and see the Bib-li-cal dances, as they were performed before the Pa-tri-archs. Come and see the Whip, the longest, fastest ride in the—"

"Round and round the great wheel goes. Where she stops, nobo— And she stops at number thirty-four, gents!"

"Nope," says the Carnival Kid to himself. "That stuff's the McCoy, all right, but no more for me. That grift is over. Because there's one town I'll never make again."

He gathers himself up and lurches off into the rain . . .

RAINY days are not forever. It turned hot the next day, and the Kid got a job with a contractor who was developing a canal section and needed a few laborers for local color. The Kid worked with a pick and shovel for three days before he was laid off.

Sunday was hot again, and he made eleven dollars at the bath-house. Also, on Monday morning he found a beaded bag.

He looked around, but Papologous wasn't in sight, and neither was Mike, the regular man. Cautiously he opened it. Eighteen dollars, a pawn-ticket for a ring, a compact, a package of Egyptian Deities.

Eighteen dollars. There was an open dice game at the beach. One? Well, there was a game in a certain garage that he thought of right away. Shoots ten dollars. Shoots twenty dollars. Shoots forty dollars. Draw down then. Shoot ten dollars. They can't break bad all the time.

Two hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars. And get started again, with another outfit. One going West. Keep away from the South for six months, a year—away from that town and its sheriff. Just two hundred bucks, enough to buy a front. Suddenly the Kid's lips sneered.

"Yah, you moll-buzzer!" he said. "Lifting from a dame, now, you cheap bum. Hey, Pop! Papologous! I got a dame's leath—uh, I got a dame's keist—uh, a pocketbook. Here, take it."

"So," said Papologous. "So. Give it to me, Frank. D'ja look in it?"

"Sure. Eighteen bucks."

"Well, maybe she don't come back for it, Frank."

She came all right. Sadie from the five-and-ten? No. The woman who was to be everything to the Carnival Kid? What do you think this is? No. A woman who looked like what she was—which is a feat nowadays—and who gave the Kid two dollars and went away.

"So," said Papologous. "Frank, the season is bad. I can't pay you much. I give you ten dollars a week; you take a chance. If we got good weather you make something in tips."

"Sold," said the Carnival Kid.

Let's leave him there. The Carnival Kid's turned square shooter. Let's not look at the rest of it. Look out over the city roofs the next time you travel on the L. Know what made those roofs? Virtuous attachments. Every house like the next house, every one with a couple of mortgages. In some of those houses—don't estimate how many—there's a man whose feet once were set on the sunny road that leads to the next town. It's a hard disease to get over, but time will do it.

Maybe he'll be well satisfied, too. Perhaps the woman who picks him out will be his love forever. Perhaps he'll have a little boy, who'll think his father was a small time circuit Ulysses and make it plain that he thinks so.

What can he do, the Carnival Kid? He can't be a bookkeeper, or hold a nice job. A milkman he could be, maybe. Get out at midnight and harness up, with hands that tremble on the freezing snaffles. Drive off *clomp-clomp-clomp* and *rattlety-bang* through the deserted streets, seeing at times something to remind him that every one isn't straight, hasn't learned the lesson that he learned one April night in a Southern town. See a lighted window, or hear a laugh, or the careless words of belated revelers.

And then turn back at last, weary and cold, into his own shabby street and go to bed in the daylight.

A Story of a Warfaring Tramp Steamer

Cease Firing

By BEN J. PETMECKY

"FIRE!"

Boom!

High up on the poop deck of the rusty old tramp steamer a breech loading rifle recoiled, then slipped smoothly forward into position. Out toward the horizon, spurts of water leaped skyward as a projectile clipped the wave tops. A black speck rose and fell. Blue clad figures about the breech of the gun blurred into action. "Cease firing!" the order rose above the clash of the closing breech.

"False alarm!" snapped the chief boatswain's mate, lowering his binoculars. It's only a floating barrel and I'm darn glad of it. The way you two guys are handling that gun, we would have been out of luck it if had happened to be the real article. Better snap out of it unless you are anxious to swim to Liverpool."

The short, bowlegged seaman raised his eyes form the telescope sight and faced the chief, bristling.

"The elevation was about right," he announced. "I can't help it if that long drink of water don't hold her on the mark."

"Sure," acquiesced the tall sailor on the opposite side of the gun, "I was wrong. You never made a miss in your life. Always on the mark—that's you. I know they made a mistake and enlisted you in the Navy when you tried to join the Boy Scouts, but what cock eyed idiot ever let you get in the armed guard is more than I can see."

"Ye gods!" wailed the chief boatswain's mate, "can't you two fellows ever forget your little fuss? Two weeks ago you were the best friends in the world; now you fight like a couple of kids over a stick of candy. Can't you forget your row

when you are handling the gun anyway?

"Listen to me! The radio operator picked up two S. O. S. calls last night. Two ships torpedoed right about where we are now. Ships too—real ships, not rusty old tubs like we have here. Ships with real engines to run with, and real gun crews to take care of them. If we get this wreck to Liverpool we are lucky. She should have been junked years ago."

The neutral members of the gun crew murmured an indorsement to the chief's words. In terming the old *S. S. Vernon* a rusty old tub, he had not exaggerated. Having long since outlived her usefulness, the *Vernon* had been rusting in the mud when war was declared. Actuated by the increased demand for shipping, and emboldened by the armament furnished by the Navy for the hitherto defenseless merchant vessels, her owners decided to send the old ship to sea once more.

One five inch gun, however, no matter how efficiently manned, can not compensate for obsolete engines and bad boilers. With the additional handicap of a gun crew torn by internal strife until effective gunnery was practically impossible, the owners of the *S. S. Vernon* would have reason to consider themselves extremely fortunate if their ship docked safely.

Slim Newton, the tall gunner, stretched himself disgustedly on the deck. The rest of the crew assumed positions of leisure near the gun. Casey, the chief, was a good scout, but Slim wished he did not understand quite so well the cause of the feud between himself and Bynam. It had been unfortunate, meeting Casey in Norfolk that night a short month ago. He closed his eyes and allowed his mind to picture the occasion.

He had been lonesome; the lobby of the "Y" teeming with blue and khaki clad figures, with an occasional spot of the forest green of the Marine Corps only made his suffering more intense. He hitched up the leg of his bell shaped trousers and produced a roll of currency.

"Enough legal tender to procure dinner for two and tickets to a good show," he reflected. "For the first time in months I find myself in funds, and there's nobody to help me spend them. Gosh! I hate to step out alone."

Whack!

A hearty slap on the back brought a protesting cough from the tall bluejacket.

"Hello there, Damon. Where's Pythias?"

Slim turned to confront a grinning young person clad in a chief petty officer's uniform—Casey.

"Say, I've got some news for you," Casey continued. "It will tickle you stiff when you hear about it. Get Pythias and let's step out and get something to eat while we talk. I looked all over town for you birds; didn't think I'd find you here at the 'Y'. Hurry up and find Shorty—I'm starved."

"You mean that guy Bynam, I guess," grudgingly from Newton.

"Sure, he's bound to be around here somewhere. I never saw you two far apart."

"I haven't any idea where you could find that guy. I'm off of him for life."

"No!" the chief's eyes widened. "Don't you try to kid me, sailor. The terrible twins from the *Arizona* have parted company? I never would have believed it if any one else had told me. How come?"

"Oh, I just couldn't stand him any longer," morosely.

"Well," Casey sighed resignedly, "let's go get something to eat."

"Let's go get something to drink," Newton suggested hopefully.

"Look here, you lanky boot," Casey blazed, "just because you fell out with your buddy is no reason for you to try to make a fool of yourself. I never saw you take a drink in my life, and I'm not going to see you start now. I said, let's go get something to eat. Now come on!"

A FEW minutes later, under the influence of good food, Newton's morale showed symptoms of improving. The old Newton of the *U. S. S. Arizona* was being resurrected. Then Casey saw him stiffen and devote his attention ostentatiously to the table before him.

Glancing about for the cause of the

sudden transformation, Casey stifled an impulse to laugh. A short young sailor with vastly bowed legs was entering the café accompanied by a tall, extremely blond young lady.

Sighting the pair at the table, the newcomer did the one thing possible to increase the ludicrousness of his appearance. Exuding dignity from every pore, his elevated chin barely topping his companion's shoulder, he strutted past the two earlier arrivals and selected a table on the opposite side of the house.

"High toned, by gosh!" chuckled Casey. "So that's the trouble, is it? I guess if there had been a blond young lady in the case we might be hearing a different story about the original Damon and Pythias today."

"How I ever stood that guy as long as I did is a mystery to me," burst from Newton. "You remember, Casey, how thick we used to be when we were on the *Arizona*. Why I figured that half of whatever I had belonged to him, and I thought he felt the same way about me."

"Sure I remember," assented the chief boatswain's mate. "You were a regular public nuisance. If a fellow said anything about one of you he had the other one to whip. Up in the chief's quarters we used to point to you two to prove that all the shipmates didn't go down on the *Maine*."

"Yeah," Newton agreed, "I used to even scrub all his clothes for him because the little shrimp hated to do it himself. And now, after all we have been through together, he shakes me for that Jane. It makes me kind of sick."

"When did he beat your time with this skirt?" keenly inquired Casey.

"Beat my time, hell!" exploded Newton, "I did go with her a while, and like a fool I introduced that sawed off little animal to her, but that's not what makes me sore. I just hate to see a fellow make a fool of himself that way."

"You are the lucky one, Slim," Casey informed him. "I can't see why you want to be sore. Why she might even marry him. I heard she had her divorce."

"Divorce! Say, you aren't trying to string me, are you? What do you know about her?"

"Why I thought every man in the fleet knew her," Casey spoke seriously. "She's married half a dozen sailors at one time or another. They used to call her 'Battleship Kate.' The last time I heard of her she was married to that fat cook on the *Arizona*. She specializes in Navy men, but there used to be a couple of Marines hanging around her too."

"Marines!" Newton shuddered.

"Yeah." Casey grinned unfeelingly. "Marines—leathernecks. Of course I wouldn't say anything against the lady's character, but I don't believe she is worth falling out with a shipmate about."

Newton grunted noncomittally, but Casey felt that the feud was ended, and congratulated himself accordingly.

"I'm glad that's settled now because what I wanted to tell you was that I've been assigned to your gun crew and I just got a tip that we are going to be making a trip across right away," Casey informed his companion.

"Now that's something else to ball things up," Newton grumbled. "I'd figured on asking to be put in some other crew, but if I did it now it would give him a chance to say that I was afraid to go. Well, such is life in the Navy. When do we shove off?"

Since the long anticipated voyage had become a reality, relations between the erstwhile comrades had grown steadily worse and a condition of open hostility now prevailed which was proving detrimental to efficient gunnery.

Submarine alarms had been numerous, but all had proven groundless. It was not until this time that an actual demonstration showed how disrupt the once efficient gun crew had become.

LATER in the evening, as the chief boatswain's mate was emerging from the forecastle, mentally denouncing all "limey" stewards and their fondness for serving stewed mutton, he was accosted by a member of his gun crew.

"More hell popped off, Chief," he was

informed. "Slim Newton just fell through an open hatch and sprained his ankle. Looks like you will have to give me a try-out as pointer now."

Hurrying aft to verify the information Casey found Newton grimly submitting to the ministrations of the mate—the *S. S. Vernon* boasted no surgeon.

"Bathe it in hot water, and tomorrow if the swelling has gone down bandage it again, or let me do it," the mate advised. "The carpenter can rig up some kind of a crutch, and in time you will be all right. You must stay off of that foot for a while though."

Newton, his face drawn and pale, groaned.

"If we do meet with a real sub I hope it gets us," he gritted, "If that runt sank a sub while I was on the sick list there would be no living in the same Navy with him."

FOR SEVERAL days after the gun pointer's mishap the gun crew knew no rest. Men had to be drilled to fill new positions, taught to handle the gun short handed, and Casey spared neither his men nor himself. After three days of intensive drill, the chief grudgingly admitted that a fair degree of proficiency had been reached.

His opinion was not shared by Newton, who had been an interested spectator during the practise, and who had taken delight in offering uncomplimentary criticism at every opportunity. The crew, with the exception of Bynam, accepted the tall gunner's banter good naturedly. Bynam fumed, and ostentatiously ignored his former ally.

When Newton, during one of the drill periods, appeared on the poop deck burdened with three life preservers, the crew grinned in anticipation. Newton donned one, then attempted to assemble the other two about his elongated anatomy.

"What's the idea, Slim?" some one inquired.

"Just trying on my new pajamas," Newton answered seriously. "The chances look pretty good for a swim most any time now, so from now on I sleep in this safety first nightie."

Bynam, with a snort, rushed for the tall youth, and it required heroic measures to prevent blood being shed. After the clash Casey decided to issue a few orders, and thereafter the poop deck remained sacrosanct during gun drill as far as Newton was concerned.

It had been estimated that the ship would require from eighteen to twenty days to complete the voyage from Norfolk to Liverpool under favorable conditions. The gun crew, accustomed to the height of steaming efficiency, gloomily predicted that if unfavorable conditions were encountered the ship would dock some time in the following spring. They were agreeably surprised then, after fourteen days, to be informed that the *Vernon* had outdone herself and that, barring accidents, she would dock in Liverpool in two more days.

"Getting closer to land all right," Casey informed the group clustered about the gun. "Notice how much colder it's getting and how bad the fog has been? I believe we have passed through the most dangerous part of the war zone without even a smell of a U-boat. Of course there have been ships torpedoed even closer in than we are now—even been subs reported in the English channel—but these waters are pretty well patrolled by destroyers and chasers now so there can't be much danger. We won't slack up though until we are tied up to the dock. We still sleep by the guns and keep a sharp lookout for trouble."

Newton rose painfully from the deck and began to lash his spread hammock loosely.

"Some advantage in being a passenger on a night like this," he commented. "I've been sleeping here with you fellows just to be sociable, but I know a compartment up forward where I can sling the old hammock to advantage on a nasty night like this."

The men unanimously envied the tall seaman as he hobbled away, for he had been entirely correct in terming the night

nasty. The ship was slipping slowly through a fog that beaded the men's brows and gathered like dew on the fuzz of their blankets. A warm hammock in a dry compartment would have been welcomed by the most hardy.

The night seemed interminable to the damp and disgusted gun crew. Unable to sleep except in fitful snatches, they denounced the Navy, the armed guard and everything pertaining to it. Toward morning Bynam rose and stretched himself.

"I'm going below for a smoke," he informed the man on watch. "Darn nuisance this business of not showing a light on the top side. Dangerous too—I'd as soon take my chances with a sub as to be rammed by some other ship. What they ought to— "

Crash!

Bynam's bowed legs proved unequal to the emergency and he was thrown to the deck. The ship shuddered and groaned—shook, quivering as if about to fall to pieces. Bells jingled. Gear and cargo crashed, broken loose by the shock. Men ran wildly about up forward. The engines ceased to vibrate, then raced wildly. The ship moved slowly astern. The mate's voice, bellowing orders, rose above the din. Bynam found himself in his position at the gun.

"Where away?" he breathed, twirling the elevating mechanism nervously.

"Damned if I know," he heard Casey growl.

"Torpedoed?" tensely inquired a shell man.

"Don't know. Never been torpedoed—don't know how it feels. Seemed to me like a ram though. Every man keep a sharp lookout, but stay in your positions," snapped the chief.

TENSELY, the men peered into the gloom, searching for an invisible assailant. Up forward, the confusion was growing worse. Orders were being shouted. Metal clanged against metal. The ship, its engines stopped, rolled sickeningly in the trough of the waves. Loosened cargo banged in the holds. Water broke over the well deck.

"She's sinking by the head!" some one chattered. "See how she's listing—forward and to port."

"We are hit up forward all right," Casey agreed, "but with the way she's rolling and pitching, how you can tell which way she is listing is more than I can see."

"Up forward."

The words penetrated Bynam's confused brain slowly. Newt had been up forward! What was the matter with him? Why wasn't he here now? Had the crash ended things for Newt? The crash had been severe enough to throw a man over the side if he had been standing just right. No, that couldn't have happened; Newt had been safe in his hammock. Why didn't he come on them?

"I'll go look for him as soon as I can leave this gun," he promised himself, stifling an impulse to grow panicky.

The deck had assumed a perceptible list now. Up forward, men could be discerned bustling about, but the former confusion had given place to order. The gun crew envied the merchantmen their activity. Anything, they felt, would be better than this endless waiting.

"Those merchant sailors are better men than I gave them credit for," some one whispered.

"Yeah, it takes a man to go to sea on an old wreck like this," another agreed. "I'm beginning to wish I hadn't been so darn patriotic myself. Dry land would feel fine under my feet right now."

"I talked to a fellow who had been torpedoed once," the first speaker went on. "He said that he held to a life belt all night. Nearly froze to death before he was picked up. The fellows who were too close to the ship when she went down were sucked under when she made her last—"

"Pipe down, you!" Casey snapped. "Ain't we in bad enough fix now without you giving us that kind of stuff to listen to?"

"It's getting light now, and not a thing

in sight," the chief boatswain's mate spoke a few minutes later. "I'm going forward and see what I can find out. Look to your life belts, and stay on your toes until I get back."

The minutes dragged on as the ship sank lower and lower at the bow. Bynam gripped himself to keep from becoming hysterical. Why didn't Newt come? He wasn't the kind of guy to be away from his buddies at a time like this. Good old Newt—he hadn't half appreciated him. Why didn't Casey hurry back? He might bring some news of Newt.

"Here comes Casey. What was it, Chief?" the shell man shouted.

"It wasn't a torpedo," Casey imparted. "We rammed something—an English tramp steamer, the radio operator says. She's all right."

"Yeah, but how about us? Do we swim to Liverpool or not?"

"Can't tell you yet. We are leaking pretty badly up forward, but the captain says we may be able to make it. They have closed all water tight doors up there and if the bulkheads hold we can float. Radio operator is trying to pick up a destroyer to convoy us in."

All doors closed!

Bynam staggered. Newt had been going to sleep in one of those compartments. Had he been caught behind the closed door like a rat in a trap? Newt was crippled—couldn't move fast—he might have been knocked unconscious by the shock of the collision. Might be in there now waiting for the water to cover him.

"See Newt anywhere?" he inquired of the chief.

"No, but he's all right. He's old enough to take care of himself."

"Chief," cried Bynam, "I'm going to look for Newt. Put another man in my place here; we won't need this gun anyway. Newt is in one of those compartments. He would have been here before now if something hadn't happened to him."

Without waiting for a reply, Byman started forward. As he picked his way through the débris that littered the deck, something kept singing in his head, buzzing through his brain.

"Something wrong with Newt. Good old Newt—best buddy a fellow ever had. He mustn't go thinking I'm sore at him. Why, he used to take care of me like I was a baby! Have to find him now."

Men were moving cargo out of the forward hold, taking it aft in an attempt to level the ship. Boxes and bales littered the well deck. Water sloughed back and forth across the deck as the ship wallowed in the heavy seas. Weighty objects skidded across and about, banging against hatch combings and sides. It was slow work picking one's way through the chaos.

A bulkhead barred his way, its watertight door held rigidly closed by a bar fastening. On the previous day he had seen Newton inspecting the compartment behind that bulkhead. This must be where he had intended to sleep. He grasped the bar, then hesitated. Opening that door might let the water through —might sink the ship.

"Captain says we may be able to make it if the bulkheads hold," Casey's words flitted through his mind.

Well, suppose the ship did sink, wouldn't there still be a fighting chance? Had the radio operator been able to call some ship to the rescue? And suppose Newt was lost, would life be worth living with Newt gone, hating him?

"To hell with the ship," insanely he grasped the bar.

"Get away from that door!" It was the mate speaking.

"Newt's in there—he was going to sleep there," Bynam sobbed.

"Damn Newt—get away from that door! The whole bow is leaking and that door was closed to keep us afloat. Do you want to sink us?"

"But Newt's in there," stubbornly.

"Sorry," the mate spoke grimly, "we can't sink the ship just for Newt—whoever he is. The side is half torn off of us here and if she sinks any lower that compartment will fill with water. We can float if the bulkhead holds."

"And Newt will be drowned like

a rat in a trap. Open that door!"

Madly he grasped the bar.

Lights flashed suddenly, a bell buzzed, and Bynam fell striking his head on the steel deck.

"Clean crazy," muttered the mate, caressing his bleeding knuckles. "At that I don't blame him much. It must be hell to see a friend go like that. Here you," he called to a passing seaman, "get this fellow back to his gun. We may need him before we reach land."

REGAINING consciousness, Bynam found himself stretched on a blanket. He was on the poop deck near the gun. He groaned—Newt was gone. He had disgraced himself, deserted his post, gone crazy, made a fool of himself—and Newt was gone.

He glanced toward the gun. The crew were at ease. Day had come.

"Take it easy, boy," a voice advised.

Twisting his head painfully in the direction from which the voice came, Bynam became aware of a bandaged ankle beside him on the deck. Here his gaze rested, afraid to follow the limb to its source.

"I lost my crutch in the crash," the familiar voice went on. It took me a long time to get here—had to crawl most of the way. Then they told me you had gone to look for me, so I had to go back. The mate told me what happened."

"I was looking for you, Newt," Bynam said hurriedly. Then "I wanted to tell you what I was too stubborn to say before. She wasn't worth falling out about. She married a Marine the day before we shoved off."

THE *S. S. Vernon*, her bow low in the water, but steaming steadily, approached the coast of England, convoyed by a slim gray destroyer. A tall figure stood on her poop deck, leaning on an improvised crutch. He was stretching a short line between two guys.

Something white fluttered, then waved gallantly in the breeze. A pair of bell legged trousers, absurdly abbreviated, the legs permanently molded in the form of a parentheses, hung drying on the line

A KING OF MAN EATERS

By N. Tourneur

HE OUGHT to have figured as chief character in some famous novel of adventure, for William Buckley's thirty-two years of life among the most primitive and savage of savage races was crammed with excitement and adventures. Authors are frequently censured for the use of coincidence, but Buckley's avoidance of death and the cook-pots and his rise to kingship occurred in circumstances of coincidence, the most phenomenal known. No fiction writer but life itself stretched this long arm of coincidence and achieved the improbable.

When William Buckley and two comrades escaped from the convict settlement at Port Phillip, few or no doubts were raised as to their fate. The Australian blacks were already dreaded as man eaters, and were, at that time, in numbers around the Port. What did happen, at least to Buckley, was the—unexpected. As regards the other fugitive's fate, he was always, on returning to civilization, reticent and confusing in his explanation.

Sometimes it was said they had died through snake-bite; sometimes, they had got lost in the bush and, sometimes, they had gone to fill the savages' bellies. All the greater amazement, then, when Buckley came back safe and sound, to his fellow-countrymen, and after so many years

that none could recognize him. Only after a long period of patient and discreet questioning did the authorities piece together his disjointed story.

Many days after Buckley's getaway, he was eking out an existence on a few shellfish obtained along the beach and on raw fish that he speared by means of a piece of native spear which he had found among the rocks. Wandering along the shore and scanning the wastes for a sail, he was seen by some "gins" or native women. From his great height and bulk of body, matted hair and rugged features, they concluded that their recently deceased chief or king, Murragark, was come back to life.

Scuttling off to the camp, they told their menfolk; and so, of a sudden, Buckley found himself encirled by a great band of yelling and gesticulating blacks. To him, his last hour was come. He "shuk," as he says, with his fears.

The natives examined him minutely, found a scar on his chest similar to that which had marked Murragark, and recognized the spear as one their dead king had lost. That he should return as a paleface consorts with the Australian aborigine's beliefs in the after-life. But the blacks were puzzled that he could not speak their tongue, nor recognize his "gins."

With great demonstrations of joy and deference they escorted their resurrected king to the encampment. And William Buckley, having abundance of intelligence, speedily understood and took up the regal position. Every service and respect were paid him. For him were the largest eggs, the best of the fish, rats, frogs, lizards, snakes, kangaroos, opossums, grubs and gumballs. Even his "gunyah" or lean-to of boughs, bark and thatch was built for him, and he lacked in nothing that the tribe could procure.

Buckley appears to have quickly adapted himself, and very soon maintained Murragark's fame in throwing the spear, wielding the club and spinning the boomerang with deadly skill. He acquired the blacks' language and method of thought so perfectly that subsequently he had to be taught like a child to become English again. But he had to engage in fight occasionally to keep the kingship.

For thirty-two years, then, Buckley was a king of man eaters, living as a black with the blacks of Australia. Many fights he won with his tribe in their wanderings and he took part in numerous feastings and fiendish corroborees. Toward the end, vice-Murragark remained alive only through his coolness, quick wits and death dealing club; for years of famine came and the younger warriors tried to oust and eat him.

So it came that in 1835 when Buckley was fifty-five, and in constant jeopardy of his life, he found himself with his subjects suing for food and water from the colonists at Port Phillip. Some instinct had stirred in him, for he drew attention to some tattooing now indistinct on his right arm.

" 'W', sure enough!" said one of the Englishmen, and the brawny savage in his scanty kangaroo skin grinned and nodded. Then suddenly but with immense difficulty he grated:

" 'W' for Willum, 'B' for Buckley. Buckley!"

William Buckley, ex-soldier and escaped convict, was come back to his own race.

He was pardoned and pensioned, and died in Melbourne. But of his life and adventures among the Australs seldom would he talk—the white man who had become a king of man eaters.

A Novel of the Old West

BLACK

CHAPTER I

THE HOMECOMING

WHEN Steve Galt struck a match in the darkness to light a cigaret, he kept one eye closed, range fashion, so that when he tossed away the match the one eye would be undazzled by the glow. The matchlight was amazingly bright. It lighted up Steve's face, with some rather curious bitter lines about the lips, and the under side of his rather fine sombrero, and shimmered on the silk of his neckerchief. And stray gleams between his fingers disclosed the fine arched neck and alertly pricked up ears of his horse.

He puffed. The match flicked through the air, wavered where it fell and went out. Only the little red glow of the cigaret remained moving slowly through the utter blackness of the night.

"Kinda funny, Duke," came Steve's drawling voice, "me bein' lost on th' old Block H. It ain't your fault. Y'uv never been heah before. But me, I was born heah an' I lived heah until Uncle Peter kicked me out. Nice, gentle kinda feller Uncle Peter was—an' is."

There was pure irony in Steve's meditative tones.

"My pa sure picked out a humdinger to raise me up . . . This heah's a right nice range, Duke. You'll like it. We're comin' back heah to live some day if Uncle Peter ain't persuaded the neighbors to be waitin' as a lynchin' party t' welcome me . . . Kinda funny me bein' lost though . . ."

He rode on slowly as one rides who has lost touch with landmarks and is not particularly worried about where he may be. Duke, the horse, picked his way leisurely through the occasional clumps of sage and chaparral. Dark clouds blotted out every star and there were small and intermittent flashes of light around the horizon. The earth smelled hot and dry.

and a Youth They Called

SHEEP

By MURRAY LEINSTER

"Might be a storm heah, t'night," observed Steve, drawling abstractedly to his mount.

A man who rides much alone, especially if he knows his horse thoroughly, will talk to the animal as if to a human being.

"Don't have many of 'em thisaway, but when they come, they come snortin'. My pa, he got wiped out by a cloudburst up in the hills yonder. Huntin' some cattle, an' th' water come down . . . Uncle Peter, he didn't do much mournin".

It was hot and still and dry, and dark as the inside of an oven. Clouds overhead with little flickering tongues of flame licking at the horizon. But all the earth was very quiet and not a breath of wind was stirring. The only sounds were the crunching noises of Duke's hoofs on the dry baked earth and the occasional rustlings as he forced his way through a bit of parched shrubbery.

Then, very, very far away, there was a faint *pop!* Then another, in haste. Then four other shots deliberately spaced.

Steve turned his head and listened alertly.

"Wonder what's happenin' over yonder? Feller might be sleepin' out, an' shootin' at a coyote, but unless I'm lost a lot worse'n I think, he'd be makin' for a roof this night. Or maybe it was a night herd shootin' at a lobo or somethin'—"

He paused, then turned Duke's head about.

"We'll go look, Duke. If it's a man-shootin'— Time was when folks credited me with all th' hell raisin' around heah. I'll go see who's takin' my place in the public eye."

Duke began to move a little more rapidly, turning his head this way and that and choosing a path with much more certainty than seemed possible in such darkness. A good horse, pressed, will choose

his footing in inky blackness on a basis of two parts inspiration and three parts trusting to luck. Duke was leaving four-fifths of it to luck and he made good time.

He was headed directly for the source of the sound when out of the darkness ahead came the pounding and thudding of a horse's hoofs. This other horse was tearing through the night in something approaching panic, utterly reckless of possible holes or rocks. It was coming, too, nearly in a direct line toward Steve.

The licking lightning at the horizon's edge grew suddenly brighter. A vivid but soundless flash cast curious shadows in its momentary flaming. A horse was breasting its way through a clump of sage, its eyes rolling, its rider bent forward in the saddle and spurring it savagely.

STEVE reined in. His hand dropped uncertainly to his hip. He widened his eyes, waiting for another flash. It came and showed the other rider almost on top of him. The other man sawed at his reins and veered away, riding past almost at arm's length.

"Hey, brother!" called Steve.

Dead blackness again. The rapid staccato of the other horse's hoofs retreating. Then their tempo changed. The horse was being reined in. It came trotting back. In the fugitive faint light of the lightning away down on the edge of the world Steve could see it moving toward him as a vague bulk. A flash a shade brighter than the average showed the other rider hunched down in the saddle as if he did not want his face to be seen.

"Howdy," said the unseen rider.

His voice was peculiarly strained and blurred. It sounded almost as if he were anxious to disguise it.

"Howdy, brother," drawled Steve. "You behold a wanderin' stranger. I was ridin' hither an' yon an' I got lost. C'd you tell me, maybe, wheah I c'd find grub an' a bunk for t'night?"

"Yeah," said the other voice. It remained strained and blurred. "Th' Block H is over thataway about four miles. Can't miss the ranch-house." A pause. "Say, did you hear some shots just now?"

"Yep," admitted Steve. "I was ridin' over thataway. Thought it might be a night herd an' I might get me some directions."

Another pause. Lightning split the sky—and Steve was looking at the muzzle of a gun not three feet from his middle.

"Stick 'em up!" ordered the other man, his voice rising almost to panic pitch. "Stick 'em up or I'll plug you!"

The gun muzzle was touching Steve's belt buckle. The other man was close indeed. Steve felt the horse touch against his leg. Then a hand was fumbling—and trembling as it fumbled—at his holsters.

The other man reined back.

"I'll drop my hands now if y'ain't got any objection," drawled Steve.

"This is—ain't a holdup," panted the other. "I want your boots. I'll pay for 'em. Quick!"

"Right fond of my boots," protested Steve mildly.

"Want me to plug you and take 'em?" demanded the unseen rider shrilly.

A dull rumble of thunder came from the east. The faint glow of lightning disclosed the other man's neckerchief drawn up about his face. The glitter of light on his gun showed it mercilessly upon Steve.

"Under the circumstances," drawled Steve, "I reckon I got t' oblige."

He stripped off his boots. The other man snatched them with his left hand. Something slapped across Duke's saddle and made him jump.

"There's pay for 'em," panted the voice. "Wait a minute."

He backed his horse away while Steve's fingers amazedly assured him that the thing slapped across the saddle was a money belt; more, it was weighted down with coins.

Something dropped to the earth with a thud. Another thud followed it.

"Here's my boots," panted the voice. "There's plenty in the money belt to pay for yours. Your guns'll be by the boots. Right here!"

A gun bellowed, pointed toward the earth, and in its flash the spotted legs of a pinto pony were outlined and photographed on Steve's brain forever.

Two seconds later the pinto pony and its rider had whirled about and were streaking it away in the darkness.

Steve stared and his lips drew up into a soundless whistle. He sat still, waiting for a glimmer of lightning to show him what the other man had dropped. Something vivid and blinding leaped across midsky, and a tumbled heap before his eyes was unquestionably a pair of boots and two guns.

Utterly blinded by the flash and the succeeding darkness, Steve dismounted and groped for them as a little flurry of wind played about him and died away. He slipped his feet into the boots while Duke stood above him uneasily. They fitted rather well. Steve blew into the muzzles of his guns and slipped them back into his holsters before remounting.

He settled himself in the saddle once more, his lips still puckered in the darkness.

"Duke," he said soberly, "I got me a idea that we better get goin' over wheah those shots come from. If I' got to be in another man's boots, I want t' know what he's gone an' done."

He set Duke to a trot.

"Somebody's got shot," he observed with ironic humor, "an' they all set t' blame it on me. Jus' like ol' times, Duke. If that was Uncle Peter or his pet foreman Swain, I'd say they'd gone an' done it out o' habit. How far'd you say it was to wheah those shots were? That feller was makin' time . . ."

FAR AWAY, there was a little rushing sound—rain sweeping across the range. Thunder began as hoarse growlings which would set cattle to milling restlessly and nightherd riders to resigned swearing. Steve rode steadily, looking sharply in the bright lightning flashes for some sign of a hut. With the rain that was coming, tracks in the open would be washed away. There would have been no need for a man wishing to conceal his identity to change his boots. That change itself not only argued tracks left under cover, but almost described the place.

"Line rider's shack, or a ol' squatter's shanty," said Steve meditatively, "because theah'd have t' be a dirt floor t' make that feller want t' change his boots. Shacks that ain't much used generally have dirt floors on account of things holin' up under wooden ones. Squatter's shanties have dirt floors because squatters are so durned lazy. Whoever got killed was killed for somethin' outside o' money, because that feller flung this heah cash at me. Musta belonged to the one that was shot."

The rain was closer now, racing toward him in a torrential downpour. There were little flurries of wind, cool and damp, that contrasted curiously with the dry hotness of the air a few moments before. The sage was rustling alarmedly to itself. The air Steve breathed had a curious cold bite to it.

And then the thunder burst loose overhead in a raging bedlam of noise and licking flames. The storm struck.

In seconds Steve was soaked to the skin and water was running off Duke's hide in little rivulets that glistened in the lightning flashes. Wind tore at horse and rider alike; wind that bore huge raindrops that stung when they struck the flesh. When the lightning flashed, it limned the sage and chaparral in curiously photographic black and white, with exaggerated deep shadows and invariably seeming frozen in some strained position into which the wind had forced them.

Steve's voice when it came was in disjointed fragments between the peals of thunder.

"—kinda dampish, Duke—sort o' fireworks illumination for the wanderer's return, hey? It oughtn't be much farther . . ."

A curtain of rain was dripping from his sombrero's wide brim. Duke was a horse of gleaming metal, with his hide saturated with moisture. The world was alternately black and unbearably bright. A

hundred tiny streams were gathering and flowing hurriedly here and there before the earth swallowed them. Wind was blowing and carrying sheets of rain before it. Lightning was licking hungrily at earth and sky as if insanely desirous of devouring the universe itself. Thunder bellowed in expression of the storm's rage at its own futility.

The twin figure of horse and rider went soberly onward, water pouring from them in streams, and both of them glistening metallically from the wet.

Fiercer and more savage grew the thunder. The water seemed to descend in solid masses. The lightning split the sky from horizon to horizon in maniacal leaps and bounds, with its growling ever louder.

And then came a bolt so vivid and so blinding that for one split second all the world seemed on fire. The hurrying, lowering clouds overhead were outlined despite the thick mist of falling rain. To the uttermost reaches of the horizon the earth gleamed out as brightly as if in day. And then blackness descended once more, and a sudden silence—which was the pounding of falling water on the thirsty earth—seemed to wait for the roaring of thunder which would follow.

In that moment of silence Steve spoke, drawling.

"Theah's the place, Duke. He must've come from heah."

He swerved his mount and went soberly on toward a tiny shack that had leaped into view in the lightning flash.

The thunder roll from the great flash was just beginning when he reached it. It had reached a monstrous volume when he dismounted. And it drowned out and obliterated all other noises in the world when he essayed to knock upon the door. It was a colossal, overwhelming torrent of sound, filling the world with its heavy volume.

When it died slowly away toward the west in a clumsy rumbling that was still a vast tumult, Steve pushed open the door.

Stillness and silence, save for the dying rumble of thunder and the pounding rain upon the roof. No movement, no noise from within, but the acrid smell of burnt powder . . .

STEVE closed the door against the wind and struck a match. At what he saw he started forward, and the door swung wide and blew out his match again. This time he fastened the door before he made a light. When the match glowed in the dusty stillness, his expression was very sober indeed.

A candle was stuck in its own drippings on a rough board table. Steve lighted it. Then he bent down over the man who lay on the dirt floor. He turned the body over and caught his breath quickly. A bullet through the heart! And the murderer had emptied his gun, afterward, into the dead man to make sure.

Steve rose and hunted the place over carefully. He found nothing, save that the dead man's money belt had been taken. He went out and circled the house twice, looking for something. He found it on the second round. Blurred hoofprints on the ground, three-quarters washed out. There had been two horses and one had gone wandering away in one direction, freed, and the other had come upon Steve.

He refastened the door carefully. When he rode away his face was cold and hard. Thunder crackled and rolled overhead. Lightning leaped from cloud to cloud and danced crazily in mid sky. Rain still fell in dense masses. But Steve managed to construct a cigaret in the shelter of his own body, and bent his sombrero low while he lighted it. He seemed to have oriented himself perfectly now. He made unhesitatingly for one certain quarter of the compass.

Presently he spoke.

"That was Mistuh Harrison in theah, Duke," he observed in ironic humor. "He tol' me, once, that if I ever spoke to Lucy Harrison again he'd shoot me. An' I come back on account o' him, because Uncle Peter had him in a hole an' I figured I'd get him out. Instead o' which, he's dead back yonder, heah I am

with his money-belt on me, an' th' ground inside that shack is crawlin' with tracks made by th' boots I'm wearin'—an' he was killed with bullets th' same size as my guns carry. If I didn't know better, I'd vote myself guilty on that kinda evidence."

He went on in silence for a little while. When he laughed it was more like a bark.

"Black sheep," he said in a peculiar bitter amusement. "That's me. The black sheep of the family. Lucy was the only friend I had, an' she can't help but believe I killed her father. When Swain an' Uncle Peter an' Cousin Oliver get through provin' it, they'll have me believin' it myself."

He laughed again, not very pleasantly.

"Well, I always did want to rise a li'l real hell around this range, after bein' credited with so much. I reck'n I'll do it, now."

When, a little later, a thin, yellow light came through the steady downpour of rain, Steve paused and refilled the chamber in his gun that had been discharged by the man who had forcibly bought his boots. An idea struck him then, and he reined Duke in while he got out his knife. When he rode on down to the Block H ranchhouse, he was smiling peculiarly.

CHAPTER II

THE RECEPTION

"Black sheep, black sheep,
Made my pore ol' mother weep;
Black sheep, black sheep—
Baa! Baa! Baa! . . ."

STEVE actually rode up to the ranchhouse singing. When the bunkhouse door opened and some one peered out at him he laughed.

"H'lo, Swain," he called in ironic amusement. "Wheah's the fatted calf? The prodigal's done come back. I'm aimin' t' speak t' Uncle Peter awhile."

A light smote on him, the beam of a powerful flashlight. As it outlined him vividly, Steve's hands dropped to his hips.

"Turn that off, Swain," he drawled, "or I'll shoot it off."

The light went out. Steve laughed in the darkness, with rain pouring off his body in streams and with lightning making a retreating background of light behind him.

"Wheah's Cousin Oliver?" he asked amusedly. "I reckon he ought to be comin' out t' shake his head over me, anyways. Sen' him out to talk to me, Swain."

There was a buzzing above the continuous washing murmur of the rain. Swain's voice rumbling. He'd been in the bunkhouse, giving orders, perhaps, for the next day. Now he was telling the Block H hands something, but only the tone of his voice came through the sound of falling water. No words were distinguishable. The tone, though, was savage and possibly more than a little alarmed.

"Don't try no tricks, Swain," drawled Steve, smiling mirthlessly from the saddle. "Reckon I'm on to most of your kind of tricks. I ain't lightin'; an' I don't aim to hang around the ranch none exceptin' as I'm hopin' t' warn Uncle Peter. Call 'im to the door."

" 'Can't come,' " snarled Swain's voice from the bunkhouse.

"His rheumatism got worse?" queried Steve with exaggerated solicitude. "How 'bout Cousin Oliver? One or t'other of 'em will do."

"He ain't home," snarled Swain.

"He better be," said Steve. "I know you, Swain. If y' won't play, shut up. One o' you other fellers go in to the ranchhouse an' rout out either Uncle Peter or Cousin Oliver. An' the rest of you stick around. I want you sh'd heah what I' got to say."

Growling, Swain broke out from the cover of the bunkhouse and went lumbering through the downpour to the ranch house. Steve watched him, his hands on his hips.

"Right touchin', Swain," he said sardonically. "You trustin' y'self out in the open with a feller like y'say I am in shootin' distance. Didn't y'say once that

you were like t' resign heah, because you didn't want t' shoot Uncle Peter's nephew, an' it'd be a case of doin' that or gettin' plugged in y'bunk some night?"

Swain lumbered into the big, sprawling ranch-house, in which only a single light glowed dimly. Steve touched Duke lightly with his spur, and Duke began to move erratically here and there. It was not in the attempt to unseat Steve. Duke would not try that. But with only the fitful gleams of the diminishing lightning for light, Steve was a distinctly uncertain target in case, say, some one were to try to shoot from one of the ranch-house windows.

The flickering lightning showed Swain coming out of the ranch-house again. He stood on the porch, glowering. A younger man had come out with him and waited nervously, partly behind the foreman.

"Heah's y'cousin," growled Swain. "Now talk, an' get t' hell away!"

Steve laughed once more.

"Y'forget," he drawled in mocking amusement, "y'forget, Swain, that you're just the foreman, an' I'm goin' t' be ownin' the Block H some day. Black sheep always come home to roost, Swain. An' kickin' you out will be the first thing I do. But that ain't what I come heah to say."

Steve's voice changed suddenly. It was cold and hard when his next words came out.

"You, Cousin Oliver! Listen heah to me! My pa, he owned the Block H. He lef' it to your pa as long as he lives—to keep him from tryin' to cheat me more'n he could help. But when your pa dies, it comes to me. While your pa owns it, I ain't got a durned thing to say about the Block H."

"Y'dam' right, y'ain't," snarled Swain.

"But," went on Steve brittlely, "I have got some things to say about somethin' else! My pa loaned Mistuh Harrison of th' Bar Circle some money. I know 'bout it. Mistuh Harrison paid it back. I know that, too. If my pa didn't give 'im a receipt, it was because they was both honest men an' didn't need nothin' like that. Now, I been hearin'—never mind how—about Uncle Peter findin' those papers that Mistuh Harrison kinda insisted on makin' out when he borrowed that money. An' I heard that Uncle Peter, he's tryin' to collect that money all over again, with interest to date."

The younger man was excessively nervous. In the intermittent faint flickerings of the lightning he could be seen fidgeting uneasily. But again it was Swain, the foreman, who replied—

"What y'uncle does ain't none o' your business!"

"No?" asked Steve coldly. "But remember, if he dies, all the deals he's got on hand sort o' become my business. An' if he don't drop that affair right away, I aim to do something so it will be my business. That's what I come heah to say. You tell your pa, Cousin Oliver, that I'm aimin' to see that theah don't come no disgrace on the Galt family through him bein' that kinda crook. I reckon he's been robbin' me, but that's in th' family. I can stand it, like I stood a lot o' things before I lit out. But I come back heah to see that he don't rob my pa's friends because they trusted my pa. An' if he tries, I'll come shootin'. That means him, an' it means you, Cousin Oliver, an' I'll throw in a coupla slugs o' lead for Swain just for good measure."

He reined Duke about and started off, rain falling between him and those in the bunkhouse and on the ranch-house porch like a veil.

"I'll tell Harrison you were around," shouted Swain savagely after him. "Reckon he'll be glad to heah it."

STEVE rode on without answering. Rain still poured down in sheets, but the lightning and thunder had lessened, now, and in two hours or less the skies would clear magically. There was never much rain on the Block H range or in the country round about, but when rain came it came as a cloudburst. The little cañons up in the hills would contain every one of them a rushing torrent.

Dry stream beds would pour down huge volumes of water. And on reaching the open range those streams would spread out and wash great gullies in the dry earth, and then be sucked up by its thirsty pores. By noon of the next day the earth would be dry and parched and hot, and little hurrying sand devils would be sifting alkali dust over the wet marks and blotting out all signs that the rain had ever been.

Steve rode due north in the downpour for nearly an hour before he spoke. Then he lighted a cigaret under shelter of his sombrero's brim. As he flicked the match away he was frowning.

"Swain," he drawled to the dripping but attentive Duke, "he said he was goin' to tell Mistuh Harrison I was around. Y'noticed I didn't report that Mistuh Harrison was dead. It wouldn't have been wise. But it kinda surprised me to heah Swain say he'd tell Mistuh Harrison . . . If he'd known about the killin', he wouldn't ha' thought of sayin' that. An' I hadda hunch that the killin' was 'ranged from the Block H. I reckon I'm wrong."

He strained his eyes in the light, lessening, from the stormcloud hurrying toward the west.

"Miguel used to live round heah. Um. That's it."

The tiniest of glows from a window a long way off made him change his course. He rode confidently, now, and presently a little adobe hut loomed up. There was the smell of pigs and horses in the air, and Steve dismounted before he called:

"Miguel! Juana! *Abra la puerta. Es yo!*"

There were exclamations inside, muffled but not drowned by the falling rain. The door opened a crack, an eye peeped out, and then the fattest Mexican woman on the Border made a shrill clamor of joy. Steve was grinning, and the mockery was gone out of his expression now.

"Yep," he told her comfortably, "it's me. Ask Miguel if he's got stable room for my hawss, an' then I'll come in an' see what you got t' eat."

Miguel came out, thin and lathelike, to be hailed sternly by Juana and ordered to put on a *serape* before he ventured into the rain. He went back meekly and returned once more, beaming.

"How deed you come, *muchacho?*" he demanded. "An' when? *Y cuando?* Juanan, *se me di—*"

After the first attempt at English, Miguel slipped into a flood of 'dobe Spanish and, beaming all over his face, led the way to a shelter for Duke.

Once inside the leaky shack that served him for stable, he lighted a lantern and inspected Duke admiringly, while his own solitary horse thrust an aged and inquisitive head over the edge of a stall.

"Y'kinda careful of y'animals heah," suggested Steve, nodding at the stalls and sheds about him.

"*Por Dios!*" swore Miguel. "These rustlers, they tek even *mi* Rosinante eef I do not lock heem up. They are *mal hombres*, Estebanito."

"Yeah," admitted Steve. He paused. "I jus' come from the Block H," he said casually.

Miguel stared at him in the light of the lantern, then blew it out and started at a run for the house.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

"I get *mi* gun," panted Miguel. "They come 'ere! They keel you! They keel me for teking you een! They keel everybody all aroun'! 'Ell! Damn! Juana! Juana!"

He burst into the house and made for his long ancient musket on pegs above the fire. As he reached for it and got it down, Juana placidly took it away from him.

"*Que hay?*" she inquired of Steve.

Steve was grinning.

"I come heah from the Block H," he explained.

A look of alarm came over her fat features.

"But you—look be'ind? An' see that they come not?"

"Sort of," Steve assured her. "An' they can't track me, 'count of th' rain."

Juana replaced the musket and returned to her cookery.

"*Questo burroso,*" she informed him scornfully, "'e deed not theenk of that. But I knew *mi* Estebanito would know."

"I didn't," acknowledged Steve, sinking into a chair and beginning to roll a cigaret. "I kinda hoped to get some news from you folks, while waitin' for those tortillas. What they been pullin' over on the Block H while I been away?"

HE SMILED faintly while the pair wrangled furiously as to who should tell him. Juana had been Steve's nurse in the long ago. Miguel had alternated unashamedly in that duty, being driven thereto by his wife's tongue and the fact that, though work, it was less fatiguing than any other form of labor. The pair of them then had been Steve's nurses, and they alone had retained something of their adoration of him as a child in the lean times that had preceded his departure from the Block H and the county.

Now they wrangled over who should tell him of events in his absence. In the end they both told him, while Steve listened, frowning.

Steve's mother had died when he was still too young to remember. His father had been caught in the hills by a cloudburst when he was nine. And the Block H and all that went with it had gone to Steve's Uncle Peter for life. Steve's father, it may be, had known his brother thoroughly, and yet had a curious loyalty to his own blood so that he did not want his son to be reared by any but his own kin. In any event, it had seemed a safe enough plan. He'd talked to Steve once about it, Steve then being something under nine.

"Us Galts, Steve," he'd said soberly, "we're kinda hot headed sometimes, an' sometimes we get plumb foolish. Your grandpa, he had to leave home on 'count o' fightin' a duel. Back in th' ol' days, folks did that sort o' thing. He come out heah an' was a rip roarin' hellion until he got married. I was the same way. It was your ma that kinda calmed me down. An' if you're like the rest of us Galts, y'goin' t'be kinda foolish until an' unless y'get yourself th' right kinda wife. Y'uncle Peter, he kinda missed out on that. He wa'n't so lucky with his wife, an' that's why, maybe, he don't appeal t'you so much. But he's all right at bottom, Steve. Us Galts generally are. So if anything happens t'me, ever, why—he's goin' to look after you an' the ranch."

The talk made no impression on Steve at the time, of course. At nine, such solemn conversation does not make an impression. But when they brought his father home, very white and utterly still, and later put him horribly into a box and buried it, Steve came out of his passion of tears to find his Uncle Peter moving into the room his father had used, and giving his son Oliver the pony Steve had always ridden.

"This heah's my ranch now," he told Steve harshly when Steve protested. "When I'm dead, you'll get it back. But meantime I'm boss. An' heah's proof!"

The licking Steve got then left him tingling, the seeds of a corroding hatred already sown.

From then on Steve was fed and housed. That was all. His uncle, it may be, had nursed a jealousy of the brother who prospered where he had failed, who had acquired the Block H on which he had been more or less of a pensioner, never a partner. When the ranch became his until his death, he did all that he could to revenge his former position of dependency upon Steve.

Steve grew up rather silent and rather bitter. The hands on the ranch liked him better than his cousin Oliver. But for any hand to show signs of marked friendliness for Steve was, sooner or later, for that hand to get his time. The foreman under Steve's father was summarily discharged after he had pounded Peter Galt into something approaching a jelly for giving Steve a licking he had not earned.

There was a succession of foremen, and then Swain came—a sullen, lowering hulk of a man who was more silent than most men on the subject of where he had been before coming to the Block H. He took his cue from Peter Galt, and Steve had an

unhappy time of it. And then a greater intimacy than usual began between employer and foreman. One by one the old hands were let go. New men appeared, who flattered Peter Galt and were not markedly sociable with the hands on the neighboring ranches. And after a bit—though Peter Galt did not seem to note the coincidence—herds on all the ranches nearby, including the Block H, began to be mysteriously smaller than they had been.

Steve, of course, was not altogether friendless at first. His uncle's obvious hatred roused a certain amount of sympathy for him. Dick Harrison, of the Bar Circle, welcomed the boy who was already much more reserved and suspicious than he should have been. Lucy Harrison, three years younger than Steve, worshipped him with all the ardor of eleven years for fourteen.

But Steve began to get into trouble. His uncle ignored him pointedly, but ugly stories went the rounds. He found money, he claimed, and it was money which was missing from the bunkhouse of the Block H. When he was sixteen he was sullen and rather grim. He did not expect to be believed when he spoke, so he spoke little.

When Steve was eighteen, the disappearances of cattle were more marked, and his uncle had made pointed comments upon his habit of riding into the hills a good deal by himself. Dick Harrison regarded him with an uneasy frown when he rode over to sit on the ranch-house porch and listen to Lucy's talk. He had little to say himself. Mostly he wanted to listen.

He would be well enough off some day or other. When his uncle died the Block H would come back to him. But in the meantime he was being made the subject of ugly stories. There was a tale that he had been seen riding out of a little draw, riding in much haste, and that riders—Block H men—entering the draw found a cow with a new branded calf, and the brand on the calf was not at all the same as the one on the cow. One can get money for such brandings, if one knows how.

When they talked to Steve about it, he looked at Swain with burning eyes, full of an impotent hatred. He said nothing to his uncle's accusations but rode away in a sick rage. His uncle wouldn't believe him. And Dick Harrison frowned uneasily when he saw Steve after that.

THEN the climax came. Steve was nineteen, and Lucy, at sixteen, still adored him. A mixed party of Bar Circle and Block H men flushed a rider out of a cleverly hidden little cañon and found twenty head of stolen cattle in a rough corral at its end. They found a hut, which was very plainly the retreat to which Steve had been in the habit of retiring. They found some of his own prized possessions there, among them a snapshot of Lucy Harrison which she had given him.

Dick Harrison was waiting at the ranch-house gate when Steve rode up to the Bar Circle that same night. He leaned over the gate, not opening it.

"Your pa, Steve," he said grimly, "was a mighty good friend of mine. So I ain't goin' to prosecute you. Theah was ten head o' my cattle in yuh private corral, waitin' to be rustled out. Only Gawd knows how many more y'stole. An' ye had Lucy's picture in that hut o' yours. I'm advisin' you, because your pa was a friend of mine, to get out o' the county heah. Folks've been missin' a lot o' cattle an' they're gettin' fussy. I'm just advisin' you on that. But I'm warnin' you of this! If I ever see you tryin' to speak to Lucy again I'll kill you!"

Steve had first turned white, then crimson, when Lucy's picture was mentioned, and then deathly pale again. It was of no use to tell Dick Harrison that if there was a corral near his own private cabin in the hills—to retreat to when life at the Block H was unbearable—it was new work within the past three days and that he had not built it nor filled it with stolen cattle.

It was of no use to tell him that he had

been working sullenly and grimly on his own to get evidence against certain men he believed to be rustling, and that he had a pretty good idea of the whole scheme but could not furnish proof. It was of no use to talk about long, grim searches for a certain hidden place that men spoke of as Hell Sink.

Steve had known he would not be believed. He listened, deadly white, and without a word reined about and rode away. There was just one man who might believe him. Steve went to that man and told him, defiantly, all he knew. Then he disappeared.

NOW, FOUR years later, he sat smoking soberly in a chair while Miguel and Juana, wrangling, told him of matters gone from bad to worse. Immediately after his disappearance the rustling had seemed to become intensified, as if he had helped in it with an increased fury against the world. And again, a year ago, there had been another jump in the number of cattle stolen. Cows vanished by tens and fifties and hundreds. Horses disappeared mysteriously. Nightherd riding was carried on in the county to an extent unknown anywhere else.

Horsemen rode the range every night. There were rewards offered and nonprosecution promised for any member of the gang who doublecrossed the rest and told what he knew. And a steady drain of cattle was bleeding the ranches.

The Block H, it was said, was one of the heaviest sufferers, despite hard riding and readiness to shoot on the part of its hands and foreman. Steve's Uncle Peter had been forced to buy cattle from distant ranches to keep his range stocked. He had been on the verge of bankruptcy when he discovered that Dick Harrison had owed his brother—and so owed him—forty thousand dollars once advanced by Steve's father to Harrison. Harrison declared that he had paid it, but could not produce the proof. He would have to pay it again.

Steve, smiling grimly at the latter part of the narrative, nodded here.

"He won't pay it again," he drawled to the excitedly chattering couple. "He's dead. Feller wearin' these heah boots shot him t'night in that squatter's shack over by Black Ridge."

He watched as they gaped at him.

"*Dios mio!*" said Miguel, aghast. "*Porque?*"

"Why'd I shoot him?" asked Steve sardonically. "I didn't."

He told of the exchange of boots, at first seriously and then as he saw blank unbelief upon their faces, with an ironic humor. It was humorous, as he saw it, but it was not cheerful humor. Juana wrung her hands. Miguel listened nervously.

"Miguel," said Juana dolefully, "he weel guide you to thee Border-r, Estebanito."

"I ain't runnin' away," said Steve.

"But what weel you do? When you 'ave keeled a man—"

"Ye seem to forget I' been tellin' you I didn't kill him," said Steve dryly.

Juana shrugged mournfully and stirred the tortilla paste.

"I was thinkin'," drawled Steve, "of goin' t' see th' sheriff."

Two pairs of round, astonished eyes were turned upon him.

"Yeah," said Steve. "An' you all know it ain't easy to lie to him an' get away with it."

"*Por Dios, no!*" said Miguel gloomily. "I remember, once there was a *caballo*, a rack of bones, *en verdad*—"

"*Silencio!*" snapped Juana. "Do not weary Estebanito weeth your troubles. But eef he goes to the shereef—"

"Maybe," admitted Miguel, "he deed not keel Señor Harrison."

They regarded Steve speculatively. It was hard to believe. But by the time he had spread out his blankets before the fire and called them a bed, they were more or less convinced that he had told them the truth.

"Ah, *pobrecito!*" sighed Juana in her native Spanish. "I remember when he loved the Señorita Lucy . . ."

"I remember," said Miguel, with an air

of pious inspiration, "that when she came to us and asked, weeping, for news of him, she loved him also. She had always money for what news we could invent, though she was but sixteen. Always *un* quarter. Sometimes four bits."

They gazed at each other, blandly meditative.

"I will ride in the morning," announced Miguel placidly, "before she has heard of her father's death, so that she will be pleased and generous. I will tell her that he has returned—"

"*Burro!*" snapped Juana amiably. "Can you think of nothing better? Of a certainty you will tell nothing of her father's killing; but you will say that the Estebanito perishes of love for her, and that those who would keep him from her arms prepare to perish. That is what a young girl wishes to hear!"

"*Si*," assented Miguel meditatively, "it is something like the lies I used to tell to you—and others, Juana."

STEVE slept through the family row that followed Miguel's unfortunate slip of the tongue. They were always quarreling, anyhow. He opened his eyes drowsily to overhear part of a catalog of Miguel's misdeeds, in some of which the sheriff would have been interested, and dropped off to sleep again. When he awoke, Miguel had gone. Juana, beaming, served him *frijoles enchilada*. And Steve rode forth.

He had waked with a hunch. The scale of rustling going on, according to Miguel and Juana's story, was much too big for the scheme he had thought himself on the verge of uncovering before his departure from the Block H. Something newer and more daring and on a much larger scale was being worked. And Steve had a hunch that required the inspection of a bunch of Block H brands. The chances would be against his finding the sheriff in town, anyway.

Dick Harrison would have been found by this time—a hunt for him would have started when his riderless horse came home—and the sheriff would be out at the squatter's shack, looking over the ground. Steve wanted to talk to him quite alone. So Steve rode quietly off into the hills. At nightfall he would go down into Dos Aguas and find the sheriff and talk to him. Much depended on that. But in the meantime . . .

At the moment that Miguel bowed with a flourish before Lucy and informed her that he had a message for her, Steve was examining the first brand that to his eyes had a suspicious look. He looked at it carefully, and his lips puckered; an expression of thoroughly grim amusement came upon his face.

Ten miles away, Miguel waved his hands gracefully.

"The *señor*, Steve, 'e 'ave returned. 'E say that soon 'e come an' tek you, *señorita*, een hees arms. Already 'e begeen to keel 'oo would keep heem from your side."

He waited, beaming, for a reward. And Lucy Harrison stared at him blankly; bewildered, amazed and altogether doubtful what the extraordinary message meant. And then a little knot of men came riding soberly up to the ranch-house gate. Most of them tried not to look at Lucy. They bunched themselves awkwardly to hide a burden among them. But one came reluctantly toward her.

So that Lucy Harrison learned of the murder of her father immediately after receiving what purported to be a message from Steve that he was killing every one who would try to keep him from her, and that soon he would come.

Within an hour a grim and savage knot of men were interviewing Juana. They wanted to know where Steve was. Miguel couldn't tell them.

CHAPTER III

BLOTTED BRANDS

THERE were men hunting busily for Steve all the rest of that day. Miguel, scared, told Steve's own story of the exchange of boots, and it was received with the immediate incredulity he had himself

given it. Those who looked for Steve had a very definite idea that he had killed Dick Harrison—an idea on which they were prepared to act. If any Bar Circle man had seen Steve, and the Bar Circle man had been alone, he would have shot Steve on sight, or tried to. And if any group of Bar Circle men had found Steve, they would have more formally but none the less surely have tried to lynch him.

But he was up in the hills, quite unaware of Miguel's babbling, looking for blotted brands. He found them, once he knew what to look for, in amazing plenty. But rather curiously they were brands which had not occurred to any one to suspect. They had been provided with alibis in advance. Steve regarded them with increasing admiration as the specimens increased in number.

There were plenty of cattle on the Block H range, despite the rustling. Lazy Eights from the Panhandle. Peter Galt had bought a good many head of those to make good his own stock that had been rustled. And Skullbone cattle from Arizona had been brought in for the same purpose. There were a few bunches of Double Wheel stock, and Steve saw at least one small clump of Injun Head.

All of them, of course, had their original brands duly and properly canceled and the Block H brand placed alongside. When a ranch buys cattle of another brand, for any reason, the original brand is canceled with a branding iron and the cattle are rebranded. It is open and above board and a standard range practise. But Steve regarded those brands with an ironic admiration.

"Don't know whether Uncle Peter thought o' that," he told Duke dryly, "or whether 'twas Swain. But whoever figured out this heah idea, he was right smart."

He was surrounded by raw red cliffs at the moment. He was in that inextricably tangled country in which the Block H owned grazing rights, a maze of dry watercourses and minor ravines, of freakish hill formations and unmapped contours. He had been riding through a geologist's nightmare since daybreak, and it was well on toward afternoon.

"Let's see," he drawled. "Big Valley's over thataway somewheah. Ought to be some cattle in theah."

He picked a way painstakingly over a tortuous and entirely impracticable route. He took some pains not to be too conspicuous as he rode. There were other riders in the hills. The Block H ran a good many cattle in here, despite its complaints of rustling, and there were riders going here and there upon their lawful occasions. It took Steve half an hour or more to get where he could look down upon Big Valley. There he rested, looking down upon placidly grazing cattle from a pinnacle high above them.

"I'm beginnin' to see," he meditated, watching, "just how 'tis that Uncle Peter can lose so many cattle an' still be able t' buy stock an' keep up his herds. An' also, why his hands are so dawggoned ferocious about rustlers an' such. Lordy!"

The cattle, far below him, seemed to waver in the heat waves that arose from the valley. A single rider was cutting out a bunch of them, maybe twenty. He got them quite neatly out of the main herd and edged them easily toward the valley wall. They vanished into it, and Steve rubbed his eyes. Then he saw that there was a narrow slit in the sheer cliff there and the cattle had gone into it.

"In Big Valley!" said Steve in awe. "Swain was th' first that kinda insisted on grazin' cattle heah. But he didn't advertise that li'l crack in the wall. Folks don't drive cattle places wheah there ain't room for them to be. I got me a idea I'm goin' to look."

He squinted keenly all about him and retraced his way. Then for two hours more he was busy, abstractedly taking the necessary precautions against being silhouetted against the skyline. At the end of two hours he began to climb on foot, while Duke watched interestedly from below.

When he raised his head above the last rim of rocks and could look over the edge,

he was gazing down into a hole in the ground. Nothing more or less, but a hole of huge size and one whose existence he would never have suspected but for the accident of seeing the cattle driven into its entrance. There were fully twenty acres of ground abruptly sunk down below the peaks and pinnacles of rock all about it. And Steve could see some green grass and a few stunted bushes—which was unimportant—but he could also see the roof of a building of some size that had no business whatever up here in the hills.

HE WAS in the act of wriggling forward to get a better view when something smashed unpleasantly on the rocks not two feet from his head and went whining off into space. Then there were the multitudinous echoes of a shot.

Steve's plans changed instantly. He was looking for the source of the shot as he dropped down toward the waiting Duke. His gun was out and he was ready to swap lead, but he was much more anxious to get away with his information. He saw nothing but raw red earth and the variegated rocks of the pointed hilltops. Another bullet kicked up the earth about his feet as he was running to Duke, and a third and fourth and fifth slithered through the air about him. He heard yells in the distance, and the clattering of horses' hoofs.

Steve dived into a watershedding gully and went recklessly down it in the canny readiness to duck that characterizes a man who has really done his share of gun fighting.

"I gotta hunch," he drawled to Duke, "that that was Hell Sink that folks talk about an' nobody ever found. That was a high power rifle shootin' at me jus' now, Duke. Somebody was watchin' to see that nobody peeked like we were doin'." He came out of the gully and Duke stumbled, reeled and recovered himself miraculously.

"Ain't so familiar round heah," observed Steve coolly, sending Duke down again, down a suicidal incline amid a rattling and bouncing of small stones and minor landslides of dust and pebbles. "We better get in territory I know. We come down theah quicker'n we went up. My private hangout used to be over yonder. Thisaway, Duke."

He whirled around a column of rock and went streaking for the edge of a huge, flat topped mesa. From the number of horses there were at least half a dozen men coming after him, and they would be armed with rifles as against Steve's six-guns. That, in itself, was an excellent reason for ducking. The men after Steve could pot him from a distance at which his forty-fives would be practically useless.

"An' I got too much hell raisin' t' do," he said dryly, finishing the thought aloud, "to go gettin' myself plugged needlessly. Looks like theah ain't nobody else even noticed them brands."

He went tearing around the rounded, irregular edge of the mesa and saw a rider crossing the way before him, half a mile ahead, a man with a rifle holster on his saddle, and riding, apparently, to join in the chase.

"Damn!" said Steve. "If he sights me, he can hold me till them other fellers catch up."

There was nothing to it, though, but to take the chance. Steve drew his right hand gun and thundered on. The other man did not seem to have seen him. Then a curious little pocket appeared to his left, sunk back in the columnar side of the mesa wall. Steve sighted it and swerved into it in an instant.

"Back in heah," he reflected grimly, "they got to be in six-gun range to get a shot at me."

He flung himself off Duke and waited.

The clattering of hoofs was already audible. A rider flashed past the opening, rifle out of his holster and ready; then two more, trusting to their six-guns. Then three at once, two of them with Winchesters held high. They clattered past Steve and went racing on.

Steve watched in amusement. He might have dropped one or two, but somehow it did not appeal to him. These men

hadn't shot at him yet, though he had every confidence they were going to.

The sharp, biting explosions of firearms jerked his head about. He went running to where he could see, his expression one of blank amazement. The shooting was still going on when he reached the mouth of the pocket.

The rider he had dodged had been shot out of the saddle and the six who had ridden past him were racing for his body, shooting determinedly at the riderless mount which was running frantically for the far horizon. As Steve looked, in stunned surprise, the six rode up to the fallen man, bunched about him for moments, and heaved him up upon one of their mounts. Then the half dozen horses trotted on in the direction in which the riderless animal had disappeared.

"They thought he was me," said Steve grimly, "an' I thought he was one o' them. When they get back, though, that feller who shot at me with th' rifle'll tell 'em I hadda black hawss. Poor feller! I reckon I'll get th' blame for him. Wonder who he was?"

He watched, frowning, for minutes. The six did not reappear. After a long time Steve remounted and rode on. He was frowning uncomfortably and at the same time the attitude of ironic mockery that had become habitual was being replaced by a healthy, fighting anger.

"I reckon I'll borrow me a rifle from the sheriff," grunted Steve grimly a few minutes later, "an' come ridin' through these heah hills. I'm already seein' why they don't like trespassers, but th' welcome they hand out don't strike my fancy. Wonder who that feller was they killed? An' what was he doin' heah?"

He went on, and he was just angry enough not to be nearly as careful as he had been. His guess that his would be murderers would learn they had killed the wrong man was verified a little later. He was sighted from a long distance. Half a dozen bullets whined all about him from a distance so great that the *pop* that followed each one was faint and thin.

"Tryin' t' plug you, Duke," said Steve, "so's I'll be on foot an' they can ride me down real leisurely. Shake a hoof! I'm just hopin' we run into 'em, now."

HE RODE openly from then on, even swaggering a little in his saddle. A slow but deep anger began to stir within him. He let it be seen that he was heading for one certain exit from the hills and he did not deviate in the slightest from the natural route.

"Brand blottin' with a alibi," he drawled, watching like a hawk as he made his necessarily winding way toward the open range again, while shadows deepened in the valley bottoms and the sky grew insensibly darker overhead. "A regular ranch-house back in Hell Sink. Block H men ridin' herd in front of the door. Fellers shootin' at other fellers with Winchesters an' trailin' 'em with malice aforethought an' attended to afterwards. I'd right much admire to get hold o' one of those fellers with Winchesters. Somethin' tells me he'd talk some."

He rode down the last spur of the hills just as the reddened sun was sinking in the west. Steve was silhouetted against a crimson sky. Very, very far away, a flash against the horizon, was the dying sunlight heliographed from a windowpane in Dos Aguas. Just the faintest of blurrings of the horizon's clean cut rim showed the town itself. Stores, houses, the one big water tank—all of them together broke the smooth line of the horizon in one small patch of indistinctness. And that was all.

"I reckon," said Steve, "the sheriff's got a coupla warrants for me. We'll go in an' let him serve 'em. I wouldn't feel like a black sheep unless I got in jail now an' then. I'm wonderin' what he'll do when I talk to him?"

He set a course for the town and made his way across the level range, while the sun bobbed down behind the edge of the world; and purple shadows gathered furtively under the sage and mesquite brush; and the sky overhead grew darker; and little twinkling stars came out with surprising suddenness.

On the open range Duke broke into an easy, space devouring lope. The peculiar silence of twilight fell, though out on the range it is never exactly noisy. Only the softened thuds of Duke's hoofs on earth and now and then the creak of leather or the jangle of metal.

Then Steve narrowed his eyes and looked keenly at a distant speck, and suddenly he had swerved Duke about and Duke was racing at a breakneck speed toward that speck.

Sage thrashed his sides. Dust rose behind him in a cloud. He went straight as an arrow at a speed few horses could equal.

WHEN Steve reined up in a swirling mist of alkali dust, for once, there was neither mockery nor ironic amusement in his expression. He looked at the pale girl who faced him, and his eyes were much softer than anybody else had seen them for a good many years.

"Howdy, Lucy," he said quietly.

Lucy Harrison had been weeping. That was plain. But now she had forced herself into a resolute composure, though the paleness of her cheeks showed that her self possession covered an ache within.

She looked squarely at Steve.

"Why did you kill my father, Steve?"

"I didn't," said Steve very quietly indeed.

"You're wearing boots that left tracks on the floor where—where he was found."

"Yeah," conceded Steve.

Watching Lucy and noting tear marks on her cheeks, Steve felt peculiarly weary. He hadn't thought it would be like this, meeting her again. He'd dreamed about her, of course, while he was away. It hurt to think what she believed of him. And afterward, well, he'd dreamed of her with a mocking self awareness that he was keeping her memory fresh in his heart to keep himself from the rather obvious entanglements a footloose man who is already embittered can get into.

"Yeah," he said wearily. "You got that from Miguel?"

She nodded, still regarding him steadily, still with the tear marks on her cheeks and still with one small gloved hand on a tiny revolver in her belt.

"He said," she told him quietly, "that you sent me word that you had already begun to kill those who would stand between us and that you would come and carry me off, I suppose, is the politest way of putting it."

Steve did not speak. But he first went crimson and then paler than she was herself. His hand, holding the reins, began to tremble suddenly.

"I didn't send you any message a-tall," he drawled. "Not that I'm expectin' you to believe that. I came back because—"

"What?"

Steve started to speak and checked himself. Then he said deliberately—

"I got kinda homesick."

"You lie," said Lucy very quietly.

The old mocking light came back into Steve's eyes. He even smiled faintly, though without any mirth at all. He spread out his hands.

"Then," he drawled, "hadn't you better pull that theah gun you got your hand on? Why don't you shoot me? Gawd knows I won't mind."

The last was bitterness, pure and simple. He'd remembered Lucy as a girl, and he had loved that girl. But she was a woman now, and it is not always pleasant for a man to see his dreams made flesh. He smiled mockingly at the girl who had every reason to consider him her father's murderer.

"Ain't I th' ungratefulest black sheep a low down family ever turned out?" he asked in mocking amusement. "Your pa was about the best friend I had. An' I come back, an' my boots are proof I killed him. Go 'head, Lucy. Aim that li'l gun my way an' let her go."

But Lucy said more quietly still.

"The sheriff told me you were coming back. He said he wrote you."

Steve stiffened.

"Shucks," he began easily.

"Be quiet, Steve. I want to tell you some things. Miguel came to me this morning and said you'd sent him with

that message. I believed him for a moment because I'd asked them for news of you before. And I hadn't time to think it over before they rode up with my father." She was deathly white, but her voice did not falter. "I was stunned then and I think I said you'd killed him. The boys on the ranch made Miguel repeat the message he'd given me. They went looking for you. They'd have killed you if they'd found you."

Steve stroked Duke's neck absently.

"Yeah," he said absently, "if Miguel told 'em a yarn like that."

"But I—" Lucy hesitated and then she said soberly, "I know you didn't kill my father. I don't know why, I'm sure. But if you came back because the sheriff wrote you about your uncle trying to make dad pay that old debt again—"

Steve shook his head impatiently.

"I wasn't goin' to let 'em disgrace my pa thataway."

"So I'm telling you all I know." Lucy managed to summon a smile. "I came out to ride by myself so I could think. The boys at the ranch believe you did kill my father. Even I couldn't keep them from killing you, if they saw you. But—"

Steve looked up.

"I've never believed the things they said about you," said Lucy. She looked pale, and grief stricken, and yet she made her voice quite steady. "You see, Steve, I loved you before you went away. And now you've come back, I—I want the man who killed my father punished; and I—want you cleared."

Steve nodded once more. For a moment there was only the uncertain small noise the two horses made, moving restlessly while their riders talked.

"I'll 'tend to it somehow," said Steve soberly. "Yeah. I'll try. I got a kinda idea. Did you know your father was goin' to that squatter's shack?"

"N-no. He got a note of some sort and went out looking angry. I don't know what it said or who sent it."

Steve nodded to himself.

"Yeah. I'm ridin' in to see the sheriff, Lucy. Maybe we can do some business. Theah was another man killed today, up Hell Sink way by Big Valley. Chasin' me, an' they run into him. Shot him."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I reckon—" Steve smiled the ghost of a smile—"I reckon I'll get blamed for him. You an' the sheriff are th' only folks are likely to be believin' in me."

"I do," said Lucy quietly. "I don't know why. But I do believe in you."

SHE WATCHED with a curious wistfulness as he lifted his hat soberly and rode away. Duke swung again into his space eating lope. Steve had seen Lucy first at dusk. It was now dark and very, very far away there were confused small twinkles which could not ever be definitely sighted, but which were nevertheless the lights of Dos Aguas. Steve wanted to get there early.

A man could not ever say, "There they are," of those fugitive small red flickerings. He could merely realize that he had just seen the tiniest possible pinpoint of reddish light for the shortest possible instant. But they were a guide.

Steve rode for them, his face sober and his eyes peculiarly soft.

"Didn't even ask how come I had on these heah boots," he told Duke as that animal loped through the darkness for the little town. "Didn't ask nothin'. Lordy! When a woman trusts a man . . ."

He blinked aside the real meaning of Lucy's trust, but there was a peculiar still peacefulness in his heart.

Duke's hoofs thudding rhythmically on the earth. The occasional brushing of leaves against his flanks. Once or twice startled small rustlings as horse and rider went by. Stars overhead, blinking down benevolently. A night made for lovers, and Steve had talked with Lucy beneath these same stars only minutes since—and her father lay dead in the ranch-house of the Bar Circle and Steve was accused of his murder, and without a word of love-making each knew . . .

It was a long time later that the houses

of the small town took vague shape in the blackness. Then Steve reined in. He strained his eyes, refreshing his memory, and then turned Duke about to that small arroyo along which willows grew hopefully beside the small stream from the two welling waterholes that had given the town its name.

"You'll be waitin'," drawled Steve to Duke. Duke was uneasy at being picketed here when his master would go on. "I'll be back before long, I reckon. If I ain't—but I will be."

Somehow, he could not quite feel after the unsaid things in his talk with Lucy, that any danger could really remain in the world for him. But in entering the town he used all due caution. It was full of men who believed that he had killed Lucy's father, and all men believed many unpleasing things about his actions before he had gone away. Those with long memories would be suspicious of him on recognition, from the tales that had gone about before, and most men have long memories where accused rustlers are concerned. With the Bar Circle men to announce the evidence connecting him with Harrison's killing and to repeat the message Miguel had claimed to bear he could expect no mercy.

Decidedly, Dos Aguas was not a healthy place for Steve. So he slipped in, smiling, on foot. The hot and dusty smells of a small cow town near the Border rose about him and enveloped him. Noises sounded on either hand. A shrill quarrel in Spanish, coming from within adobe walls. A little farther on, a man laughing uproariously over something. Then the soft croon of a Spanish lullaby.

The tinny music of the Palace Dancehall sounded. A continuous, partly musical uproar came from that flimsy building. Flaring lamps within it glowed brightly. Some one was singing nasally. Women were laughing shrilly. There was the deeper note of men talking.

The jail was the single two story building of the town. Steve saw it looming above the rest of the structures. A lamp was lighted within it, low down. That would be the sheriff's office. Steve, clinging to the shadows, made his way toward it. There were few figures visible. Most men were at home, in the adobe shacks that Steve was leaving behind, or else gathered where conviviality reigned. A row of drooping, dusty cow ponies drowsed at the hitching rail before the Palace.

Steve moved on, smiling. He heard a movement somewhere ahead of him. He thought he heard a whisper. His hand dropped to his hip, and the smile on his face turned mocking and hard. He waited.

"You low down thief!" snarled a voice.

There was a movement. Steve was bent low and plunging forward when the flash of a gun came almost in his face. A bullet ripped the wide brim of his sombrero, and then Steve's first shot awoke a million thunderous echoes.

He went around the corner and into the alleyway between the Palace Dancehall and a closed and darkened store. He rounded that corner with both guns going. One man plunged into obscurity and was lost. Another lay very still, close against the flimsy, boarded wall of the dancehall.

STEVE stopped. There was a curious dead silence in the air. It was seconds before he realized that the music in the Palace had broken off in the middle of a bar, that the shrill laughter and nasal singing had stopped as if a hand had been laid across the mouths of those within.

Steve began to reload painstakingly. The silence held. Then there was a furtive sound and he looked up at a man's head timorously peering from a window.

"Howdy," said Steve dryly.

"Shootin' finished?"

"Reckon so," said Steve. He shoved home his last shell and holstered his weapons.

A door opened suddenly and a flood of light poured out into the narrow alleyway. Men came out, at first hesitantly, then

boldly. Steve remained in shadow, smiling ironically but alert.

"What was the matter?"

"I'm wonderin' myself," said Steve dryly. "Somebody shot at me—put a hole in my hat. So I shot back. Theah's one feller."

He watched while a man bent over.

"Dead enough."

The man struck a match. The yellow glow flared oddly on the boarded walls of dancehall and store, on the dried, dusty litter in the unswept alleyway, upon the crumpled figure.

The man with the match straightened up.

"By God!" he said wrathfully. "It's Hamby!"

Steve tilted his sombrero back a little.

"Yeah?" he drawled. "Who's Hamby?"

There was a murmur inside the dancehall.

"Hamby . . . Somebody's killed Hamby . . ."

The murmuring rose to a buzzing—an unformed and uneasy rumbling that was potentially dangerous.

The man with the matches struck another one.

"Shot in th' back, too," he said grimly. "Three, four times."

More men came out, thrusting themselves through a crowd bunched just inside the door.

"Who shot Hamby?" roared the first. Steve recognized him—Barrow, of the Crazy Fork. "Who shot Hamby?"

"This feller heah—"

"Me," said Steve evenly. "Somebody shot a hole in my hat an' he wasn't playin' any. So I let 'im have it."

"You, huh?" Barrow squinted to see him in the dimness. "I reckon I know you. Steve Galt, ain't yuh?"

Steve shrugged.

"Yeah," he said dryly. "The li'l black sheep driftin' back to th' home range. An' I shot that feller, as I'd shoot anybody else that started pluggin' at me without warnin'."

"Of course," rumbled Barrow savagely, "you didn't know he was hired by the cattlemen's association to look into rustlin' around heah! Of course not! You didn't think he might be crampin' your style! Listen to me! Maybe you're quick with your guns! I see you got your hands on 'em. But theah's too many guns around heah for you to get away! Stick up y'hands!"

"An' get lynched?" drawled Steve. He made no discernible movement, but the light from the window glittered on his drawn weapons. "Beggin' your pardon, suh, you an' yours can go plumb to hell!"

His guns wavered from side to side, hypnotically. Cramped as the alleyway was, only a few men could face him, and there was light enough for him to see the slightest movement toward a weapon. There was even light enough to show the frozen smile upon his face.

"I'll back gently out o' heah," he began.

A little distance away, from the jail, there sounded metallic clickings and thumps. Some one was unlocking and unbarring the massive jail door.

Barrow raised his voice in a roar.

"Git out the front door!" he roared. "It's Steve Galt, killed Hamby!"

A roar from inside the dancehall answered him. There was a pounding of feet, and Steve was facing the tense group in the alleyway with sure knowledge that the waver of his eyes from them would bring guns out; and the equally sure knowledge that seconds only lay between him and a blistering volley from behind.

His guns suddenly spat flame. And instead of retreating he was leaping forward. He brought down one barrel on a flinching man's head. The other missed its objective, but crunched on a man's collar bone. Steve broke through.

The bellow of guns was deafening behind him. The pounding of feet in savage pursuit began instantly. Steve tore around the back of the store, hurdled a mass of packing boxes and began to run and dodge for his life.

It was literally that. Dos Aguas was full of men. The killing of Dick Harrison was an open topic, and the Bar Circle

hands had made no secret of the evidence against Steve. Steve's reputation had been bad enough before. He had left the county under a charge of rustling cattle. Dick Harrison had threatened to kill him if he ever spoke to Lucy again. His return and Harrison's immediate murder was surely bad enough. This new, admitted killing of a man especially imported to run down rustlers was more than enough.

In seconds the single street was a seething turmoil. Men were hunting savagely in every space, between houses, even clambering upon the flat roofs in search of him.

When shots began to crackle between two houses, every man in town rushed toward the spot. Steve came out panting, his sombrero hanging crazily on his head and blood running down his leg. He fought his way blindly across the street. Guns were going everywhere, it seemed.

He staggered once, and it seemed that he would fall. But the town was not so well lighted but that gun flashes were vivid flames. He reeled against a wall; a door opened. He fell into it blindly.

With a roar, the mob streamed toward that door.

CHAPTER IV

A NEW DEPUTY IN DOS AGUAS

A FLICKERING candle gave a wavering yellowish light inside the iron barred cell. The sheriff licked a bit of sticking plaster and applied it firmly to hold a wad of cotton on Steve's temple.

"Ricochets," he observed gently, "are right funny things. Near as I can make out, that there bullet must ha' hit the jail wall an' bounced back on you. Knocked y' cold. Chances were a coupla thousan' to one it would ha' killed you."

Steve smiled peculiarly.

"Instead o' which," he said dryly, "my guns are gone. I'm in jail with a coupla murder charges hangin' over me, an' theah's a mob outside howlin' for a chance to get in heah an' lynch me."

The sheriff inspected his bandages professionally and drew back, satisfied.

"They ain't howlin' so much now," he said placidly. "See if you're strong enough to walk. I think they sent a coupla fellers out to the Bar Circle after some dynamite to blow open the jail door with. Dick Harrison had some, blastin' ditches."

Steve stood up and limped across the cell and back.

"This heah limp," he explained, "ain't my leg. That's just scratched. But the heel of my boot got shot off."

"Right warm shootin'," conceded the sheriff.

Steve sat down on the cot again and rolled a cigaret.

"I sure got a head," he commented. "How long before they get that dynamite?"

" 'Hour, maybe," said the sheriff. "They started a good while ago."

"Reckon it'll do," said Steve soberly. "Listen heah. I've found the rustlin' scheme, an' wheah it's carried out. Hell Sink's the place."

"Hamby was lookin' for that place today," said the sheriff mildly. "He's been talkin' around an' he heard of it."

Steve explained in just what part of Big Valley the narrow slit of an entrance was located. The sheriff nodded in admiration.

"I been by theah a dozen times," he admitted, "an' never would ha' thought it."

"An' the rustlin' scheme. Uncle Peter's got a lot o' bought cattle."

"Yep," said the sheriff. "He borrowed the money from the bank to buy 'em with."

"He didn't need to," said Steve grimly. "Lookaheah. It's right hard to sell ten or twenty head o' cattle, but it ain't near so hard to sell a coupla hundred. The big trouble with rustlin' is gettin' enough cattle together to make it worth while stealin' 'em. Uncle Peter's got him a good trick."

"Y'uncle Peter ain't a rustler," interposed the sheriff mildly. "I used to know him. He's a durned fool, an' a crank, an' he ain't what you'd call a amiable character, but I got me a right firm notion that he ain't a rustler."

"I saw anyways fifty cattle today on the Block H," said Steve grimly, "with blotted brands. How long since you saw him?"

"Right long," admitted the sheriff. "Come to think of it, I ain't seen him for near a year. He stays pretty close. Rheumatism, ain't it? An' last time I saw him I didn't see him. He just cussed out of a window when I went to the ranchhouse an' told me to get to hell away."

"Maybe you won't believe me," Steve said savagely. "You talk that way. But I saw Bar Circle brands changed to Block H brands, an' folks've been passin' 'em."

"I've seen a lot o' blotted brands," said the sheriff gently, "an' some right clever ones. But nothin' as clever as that."

Steve inhaled deeply.

"Time's passin'," he said briefly. "The way Uncle Peter changes a Bar Circle into a Block H is, first, to buy some Double Wheel stock to make good what rustlers have stole from him. Then he lets everybody know about it. And then he changes some Bar Circle brands into Double Wheels, which ain't difficult a-tall. Then he cancels that Double Wheel an' rebrands Block H, open an' above board. Nobody thinks of lookin' at the canceled brand. They pass the cow as a bought one."

The sheriff blinked.

"Lordy!" he said mildly. "An' I never thought o' that!"

"Same way," said Steve, "Lazy C turns into a right good Skullbone. Crazy Forks make Lazy Eights. An' a Lightnin' Bolt brand makes a particular neat Injun Head. Th' ranches Uncle Peter bought cattle from are a good long ways away. All he has t' do is figure out how to change a neighbor's brand to any brand a-tall. Then buy a few cattle from that other ranch, an' any cows of, say, Lightnin' Bolt that stray on the Block H range get led gently to wheah they can be turned int' Injun Head stock an' rebranded Block H real honest."

The sheriff nodded, his eyes quizzical.

"An' none of us thought of it," he marveled. "Somebody's sure clever! But it ain't y'Uncle Peter."

"If you think it's me," said Steve grimly, "remember I got maybe a hour to live."

"Maybe more," said the sheriff cryptically. "Wait a minute."

HE FISHED in his pocket. Steve smoked, and let his eyes wander about the dingy little cell in which what seemed to be his last hour on earth was to be spent. Raw stone, very indifferently squared, set in hard concrete. A small iron cot, with a thin bag of straw on it. A window, nearly closed by heavy iron bars. A grill of iron across one end, in which was a door of bars with a massive lock.

The sheriff was scribbling on a scrap of paper with the stub of a pencil, using his knee as a rest and with the wavering illumination of the candle for light.

"Maybe this ain't just fair," he said meditatively, writing, "because you ain't got any choice but to do like I tell you. An' th' pay ain't high. But it might come in useful."

"What?"

"Bein' my deputy," said the sheriff, signing his name. He handed over the paper. "Considerin' the circumstances, I thought I'd give you that. It might convince folks that'd doubt you otherwise."

I have appointed Steve Galt a deputy sheriff of this county, with authority to make arrests.

"But I'm in jail for murder!" said Steve.

"Hell!" said the sheriff inelegantly. "You didn't kill Hamby."

He picked up his keys and unlocked the cell door.

"Come on out in th' office an' get your guns. I had 'em bring Hamby in heah—holdin' a gun to make sure nobody tried to push past me. He was killed with rifle bullets, he's been dead three, four hours, an' his hawss came back anyways a hour ago with a bullet welt on his rump an' blood on the saddle."

He flung the cell door wide.

"I had to have you in a cell for safety. Come on. I'm figurin' that somebody had Hamby, dead, an' didn't want folks huntin' around wheah he was killed. An' it wouldn't take much thinkin' for folks to remember that I let you leave the county before, when theah was right much evidence against you. Those folks figured that if you'd got some news about wheah Hell Sink was an' so on, you'd be tryin' to find me an' pass the word along. If you come along, all right. If you didn't, why, almost anybody they c'd plug with a lot o' shootin', leavin' two bodies to be found after the shootin' stopped—"

Steve blinked suddenly.

"I reckon it was Hamby I saw get killed."

"Wheah?" The sheriff whirled about.

Steve told him.

"That must ha' been him," the sheriff agreed, "an' that kinda fits in with what I was tellin' you. They had Hamby dead. If they laid f'you an' plugged you, an' ducked prompt, it'd look like you an' Hamby'd killed each other, an' theah'd be a lot o' questions wouldn't be asked. Somebody else instead o' you would help, but you'd be the best corpse for their purpose."

He picked up Steve's guns from his desk and handed them over.

"Set down in a chair," he ordered. "Smoke up. We got half a hour yet. You came back because you got my letter."

"You said," Steve told him grimly, "my Uncle Peter was tryin' to collect that old debt Dick Harrison paid my pa years ago."

The sheriff beamed. Here in his fly specked, dusty office, he looked more than ever a mild and inoffensive person. The sheriff was small and rather lean—Steve towered over him—and his straggling white whiskers and mild blue eyes were deceptively gentle.

"Now," said the sheriff, "he'll try to collect it from Lucy. Your cousin Oliver, Steve, was courtin' Lucy right hard, until that debt business come up."

Steve smiled faintly. The sheriff watched him shrewdly.

"Y'see Lucy?"

"Yeah," said Steve. "She don't believe I killed her pa."

"My brain's buzzin'," said the sheriff. "I was all up in th' air until you told me some things. I heard right funny tales about you, Steve."

Steve told him curtly of the exchange of boots.

"You still wearin' 'em."

"They don't fit those tracks any more," said Steve dryly. "I carved 'em around the soles a little. The heel track is right much different."

The sheriff chuckled and unlimbered a huge pipe. He filled it deliberately.

"Now, to business," he said briskly. "You're a right lively person, Steve, when you get started. This heah rustlin' gang, it's right lively, too. You gave me a coupla ideas, an' I'd like a lot to keep you heah in jail until the smoke blows over. But it ain't safe. So I'm turnin' you loose."

"Thanks," said Steve dryly.

He looked out of the window. There were men visible in the light that glowed from the Palace Dancehall windows, watching the jail grimly, lest the sheriff spirit Steve away.

"I'll get you away," the sheriff chuckled. "No worry about that, Steve. But heah's my point. Folks are goin' t' be chasin' you. Some for killin' Hamby. They' goin' to be real anxious. Some for killin' Dick Harrison. They' goin' to be real anxious, too. But the ones that are goin' to be most anxious of all to catch you an' see you don't find out any more—"

"Uncle Peter, I reckon," drawled Steve. "If I c'd get anybody to listen to me, he'd be in a right nasty mess."

"Not y'Uncle Peter," demurred the sheriff. "I got me a idea he's more near innocent than you think. But—uh—let's say Swain an' maybe y'cousin. Now, you get busy runnin' away. When you find out who's most anxious to catch you, let 'em, an' arrest 'em."

"A real bright idea," said Steve, smiling faintly. "Real bright."

"Meantime," said the sheriff, "I'll take me a sort o' posse tomorrow mornin' an' ride over to the Block H. I'm goin' to insist on talkin' to your Uncle Peter. Y'ain't got any idea how much I'm goin' t' insist on talkin' to y'Uncle Peter, Steve. I think he's about as innocent as a man c'd be, but I think surprisin' results might come of my insistin' on talkin' to him. Wheah's that money belt, Steve? The one that feller paid you for your boots?"

" 'Toolhouse close by the ranch-house on the Block H," said Steve succinctly. "Flat roof. I chucked it up theah."

"Thoughtful," said the sheriff admiringly. "With that on the place I can 'rest most anybody I want to. You an' me, we sure do work together. Well, y'know what y'have to do. But I do wish you'd try to see Lucy somehow—most of the Bar Circle boys'll be in town by now, come in for your lynchin'—an' tell her to be careful. Especial, not to go ridin' anywheah by herself. It's right important, Steve."

"I'll tell her," said Steve grimly. "You mean you think—"

THERE was a sudden tinkling of glass within the room. Steve and the sheriff alike whirled on the instant. *Crash!* A gun bellowed deafeningly in the room. With a leap, Steve had smashed the lamp, but not before he had seen a splash of gruesome red on the sheriff's forehead and had seen the sheriff's face go queerly blank.

He heard the sheriff collapse as he was plunging to the window from which the shot had come. Something close to a sob of rage came from Steve as he fired.

But his eyes were dazzled by the lamplight. On this, the dark side of the jail, he could see nothing. It was useless to stand there shooting at blackness.

He came back, breathing heavily. He reloaded his gun in the pitch darkness of the jail office. The sheriff had been sure he could get him away. The sheriff was one of the two friends he had possessed.

He struck a match and extinguished it abruptly, his breath coming quickly.

"Somebody," drawled Steve unevenly in the darkness, "is goin' to get killed for this."

Then he heard yells outside. The jail was utterly dark now. Lights from the Palace Dancehall, though, gave some illumination to the single street of Dos Aguas. In the lanes of light from the windows, Steve saw a buckboard driven into plain view. There were riders behind it, eager and vengeful Bar Circle men, who scattered themselves among the crowd as the buckboard came to a stop in the light.

"Got a case of it," yelled the driver. "Somebody get somethin' to open the box with."

He jumped down, surrounded by milling, excited men. Somebody took the horses away, leaving the vehicle standing in the lamplight. The quick, nervous murmuring that a crowd makes when it is bent on mischief rose in the still night air.

There was violent argument, and despite savage demurrings a man cleared a space about himself and shouted to the jail.

"Sheriff! Listen heah! We're goin' to get Steve Galt. We don't want to hurt you, but we're goin' to get him, no matter how much shootin' there has to be."

Silence. A babble came from certain quarters of the crowd, protesting against the parley.

"You goin' to give 'im t' us?" roared the man. It was Borrow, of the Crazy Fork ranch. "We ain't hidin' who we are! We're askin' for him open an' above board. You c'n prosecute us afterward, if y'like, but we're goin' t' get Steve Galt. You goin' t' open that door before we blow it open?"

Steve, listening and watching from the window of the office, smiled his frozen smile.

"The sheriff got killed just now," he drawled out of the window. "He ain't givin' me up."

The mob paused for one second, just long enough for Steve to add—

"If you all'll listen—"

Then men roared. They seemed to go

into one of those crazy rages that only a mob can go into, when for minutes at a time it will mill about aimlessly, bellowing with wrath but without a definite purpose until some one person starts a definite action. Then all the rest follow—if the purpose of the action is destructive.

Steve grinned mirthlessly. They wouldn't listen, though if he could talk to them for just three minutes they would.

Then he saw just what he needed to see. Swain of the Block H, was snarling orders to half a dozen Block H hands. Six men would start the dynamite talk into action. Right now, though, there was none within yards of the buckboard.

Steve struck another match. The dusty, fly specked office once more. The sheriff lying crumpled on the floor, a horrible small red splotch on the floor beside his head.

Steve cuddled the rifle stock against his cheek, cocked the weapon, and sighted carefully. He didn't want to hurt the men outside.

He fired.

There was a monstrous flash, in which the buckboard disappeared utterly. A cataclysmic detonation, when it seemed that the world must have come to the end—a cataclysm that ended in the consistent tinkling of broken glass from very many windows all over Dos Aguas. Dense smoke and blown dust filled the vaguely lighted area. Men were lifted off their feet by the blast and flung about.

Silence fell. Then a raging, blood curdling roar from the mob. This was no aggregation of hoodlums, but a representative gathering of men who had suffered from rustlers and rustling until law and order seemed to be proven inadequate to cope with their needs. The blast of dynamite enraged them because it baffled them, but it did not cow them because they were not there to be frightened.

"Now what?" drawled Steve amusedly into vacancy.

The first answer was a storm of bullets into the windows of the jail. For minutes Steve could not look out. When he did, he found no encouragement in the demeanor of the mob.

The sheriff had had some way of getting him out of the jail and out of the town, some way that would not be suspected. But Steve would get no more help from the sheriff.

"Block H hand prob'ly killed the sheriff," drawled Steve to the darkness. "Th' mob'd kill me, but I'd already told the sheriff what I knew. So they plugged him."

The storm of bullets through the windows lessened, but became a purposeful, steady stream. Steve rolled a cigaret and smiled mirthlessly at nothing. The sheriff had wanted word carried to Lucy that she was not to ride anywhere alone. The sheriff knew something; something which, added to the information Steve had brought him, made him think she was in danger. It checked up. The Bar Circle belonged to Lucy now and Steve's Uncle Peter had a claim on it, a dishonest claim, but apparently a valid one in law. If Lucy died—

Steve's eyes burned in the darkness.

"Theah'd be nobody to fight the grab," he drawled. "An' forty thousan' dollars is a lot o' money an' some folks might think it was worth a coupla killin's, one of 'em bein' Lucy."

THE ROARING rage of the mob outside changed subtly. Steve shook himself— Alone in a locked jail with a dead sheriff as its only other occupant and a mob outside raging to get in to kill him.

"They blame the sheriff on me, too," he said grimly.

He risked a quick look out of the window. A man with an axe was chopping at a flagpole that at some ancient time had been erected in a strictly temporary wave of patriotism.

"Batter down the door," said Steve.

A bullet, coming through the window, missed him by inches. He saw the flash. It came from the roof of the Palace Dancehall.

"Four-five fellers, up on the roofs, shootin' at th' windows heah. It'll keep

me from pluggin' at th' batterin' ram gang, I reckon. Right good general, somebody is. Bar Circle fellers must be real enthusiastic, an' that Hamby feller I didn't kill must ha' been right important. Folks are sure determined to get me."

He smiled bitterly. Black sheep never get much sympathy. He'd come back, and two murders were laid on him, now a third. And he had abruptly assumed the importance of leader of all the rustling that had taken place about Dos Aguas in years. He'd been chased away as a rustler, and the rustling had kept on. They probably thought he'd just kept under cover. Crediting him with killing Hamby would make them sure that he was at least in cahoots with the cattle thieves who'd been robbing the range for years.

"I reckon Uncle Peter kept the story alive about me. Maybe gave out a li'l news about my doin's, from time to time."

The flagpole fell with a crash. The buzzing of the crowd died down to a deadly quiet. Steve, watching in glimpses from the window, saw ropes being passed under it for handholds.

"They'll come runnin'," he drawled, an' bust in the jail door right lively. An' then drag me out—me not knowin' th' sheriff's trick of gettin' away—an' lynch me right prompt. O' course, I can get some of 'em."

Then in the darkness he grinned. It was distinctly a mocking grin.

"Why sh'd I kill folks who only think I killed two, three men?" he drawled to the echoes within the jail. "It'd be disobligin' to try to keep 'em out o' heah."

A match glowed in his cupped hands. The glow swept about the walls of the office. He took down a large key and picked up the rifle he had fired before. Fumbling along the dingy wall, he found a belt of rifle cartridges. He slung it about his waist. And then he felt his way out of the office and down to the jail door that would be the mob's objective.

There were shouted orders outside. For a mob, this one was being very well led. An order was roared out; at least one man rushed to obey it, and others followed. Nobody paused to notice that Swain, of the Block H, was giving most of the orders, nor that Block H men were among the most active in carrying them out. The Bar Circle boys were present in full force, raging and willing to take any chances that would get them the man they believed had killed Dick Harrison. And many men who were thoroughly sick of having their cattle stolen were grimly determined to discourage rustling in the neighborhood of Dos Aguas by a prompt avenging of the death of Hamby.

Half a dozen men were perched on roofs now, and as the long flagpole went wabbling toward the jail they poured a hail of bullets into the windows from which the battering ram bearers could be fired on. As they neared the jail, the men with the pole seemed to get into step and increase their speed. When the tip of the pole was ten feet from the door, they were running. The pole struck, a terrific blow, which had an unexpected effect. The door was ajar and it flew open and hit the wall behind it a resounding crash.

Immediately thereafter there was a struggling heap of men, inextricably tangled with their battering ram and ropes, swearing and jammed in the doorway of the jail. For nearly a minute it was impossible for any man to get into or out of that door. It was necessary for the pole and ropes to be completely pulled out by the rearmost men before those in front could disentangle themselves.

During that minute the firing at the windows inevitably slackened and stopped. The men who had been intent on keeping down any possible fire from the jail windows saw the jail door open. They came leaping down from their points of vantage to be among those who would pour within. The last of them was streaking across the dimly lighted street when the mob roared and poured inside.

From the jail, then, through the bullet splintered windows, came the ugly noise of a mob hunting among cells and under cots. In every place that a panic stricken man might hide in a row of cells which

offered no hiding places they searched.

And while they hunted, the wide flung door of the jail moved slightly. It swung a little as if it would close. And from another doorway that the main door, wide open, hid completely, a figure emerged. That figure came out into the street and closed the massive door behind it, softly. It fitted a huge key to the lock and turned it, painstakingly. And then it moved along beside the jail until an opportunity offered it to slip into the shadows. The figure wore a rather battered hat and it carried a short barreled Winchester besides two holstered six-guns, and from time to time it limped peculiarly, as if, say, one of the heels had been shot from its boots.

STEVE did not hurry particularly and he was not out of hearing when the mob in the jail found it was locked in. He heard the tumultuous wrath that came of that discovery. He heard the thunder of rifle butts on the inside of the door. As Duke bore him slowly away from Dos Aguas the popping of the guns that were enragedly shooting the lock loose from its grip on the jamb were just beginning.

He rode away, sardonically amused. He had the air and the frame of mind of a man who is playing out a streak of hard luck, expecting nothing but the worst of breaks and waiting more or less indifferently until his luck changes. He rode comfortably, smoking in an entirely leisurely fashion and smiling oddly to himself. Presently he began to hum.

"Black sheep, black sheep,
Made my pore ol' mother weep;
Black sheep, black sheep,
Baa! Baa! Baa!"

He puffed at his cigaret.

"They're goin' to be tryin' to pick up our trail, Duke. I run into one killin' an' got the credit. Now they're creditin' me with two more. Maybe—"

A thought came to him. If the sheriff were right and it was dangerous for Lucy to go riding alone . . . A time when everybody was busy lynching Steve would be the safest for any action that would put Lucy out of the way and leave no one to combat a legal action for the possession of the Bar Circle.

"Shake a hoof, Duke," drawled Steve. "Bar Circle's over thataway. If anybody's home, we'll be gettin' shot at, but we got to take the chance."

Duke went thundering over the range toward the Bar Circle.

The way was both lonely and long. Twice Steve passed clumps of white faced cattle, which stared dumbly at him for an instant and then fled with a drumming of hoofs. In neither case was there the swifter staccato of a pony's hoofs which would have proven a night herd riding with them. Rustling had made a necessity of night herds with every sizable bunch of cattle about Dos Aguas.

A long journey underneath the stars, with increasing apprehension to make it longer. This was the ideal time for a raid of any sort. It wouldn't tip off anybody's hand, either, to raid any herd on this night. If Hamby had been killed in town, men would have gone in as the word reached them, to find out who had killed him and to take more resolute measures for the breaking up of the rustling which was threatening to put an end to cattle raising in this section. And it would not seem improbable to any one, later on, if they discovered that raids upon their herds had been made by rustlers counting on the excitement in Dos Aguas for safety.

As for Lucy, her disappearance in the midst of rustling raids would be easily accounted for. She'd seen and recognized somebody, the tale would run, and had been carried off to keep her from talking.

"Faster, hawss!" said Steve grimly. "Uncle Peter'd know, anyways, that Hamby was goin' to be found dead in Dos Aguas tonight. Heah an' now is th' chance for the biggest haul he ever made, if he's got the nerve to take it. Lucy disappearin' would be just what he'd need."

Duke's hoofs were drumming on the dry earth now.

That noise up ahead was horses' hoofs. Two—three horses. Steve drew one gun and went pounding on. Every man was his enemy anyway. A shrill whistle from one of the riders. Duke thudded on, leaping from the prick of Steve's spurs. Yes, a clump of white faced cattle, being rounded up in the darkness, milling uneasily.

There was a shot. Steve hadn't answered the whistle in the proper fashion. Some one cursed as Steve snapped a shot at the flash of his gun. Another man, farther away, fired twice.

Steve broke into the middle of the cattle, yelling. The bunch of clumsy beasts whirled about. There were frantic bawlings from calves and equally frantic outcries from their maternal parents. There was tumult and confusion, and Steve's gun boomed as he pumped bullets into the ground to add to the uproar.

Before he was through with the bunch of cattle they were scattering to every point of the compass, and the sound of Duke's ironshod hoofs was indistinguishable in the pounding in every direction.

He went on, in the midst of cattle who spread out fanwise, bellowing, and left him alone. He was curiously unable to see the comic angle to the fact that he, credited with leadership of all the rustling on the nearby range, was breaking up a sizable and valuable bunch of cattle that three men had gathered together with many pains and some danger for stealing.

Steve wasn't smiling any more.

"We coulda messed up those three fellers, Duke," he drawled coldly, "but I kinda suspect we're needed more elsewhere. We need a li'l more speed. Swain's locked up in the jail at Dos Aguas, unless they busted out again, but Uncle Peter goes marchin' on. Theah's the Bar Circle, praise Gawd!"

Duke seemed to have squatted down to the earth and to be sliding frictionlessly over it. He was actually running at breakneck speed and the thudding of his hoofs in hasty tempo and the occasional crash of sage brushed aside or broken in his rush told it.

THERE was a light in the bunkhouse and the ranch cook was playing on a mandolin and singing a particularly maudlin Spanish ditty to himself. No one else seemed to be near. In the ranch-house itself there were two lights.

Steve looked coolly about him. No horses about except those in the corral; nobody was inside the ranch-house on a hasty visit. And the cook's voice came warbling from the bunkhouse—

"Donde iras, tu poca golondri-i-i-ina—"

The song was a token that no untoward event had taken place so far.

Steve took a deep breath and grinned suddenly. Those fellers out on the range, with that bunch of cattle and a whistle signal for recognition while they bunched their captures to run off to the hills—He'd been frightened for a while. Now he felt better.

Dismounting, he swaggered up to the ranch-house steps and knocked on the door. After a long pause there were slow footsteps in answer. The door opened. Jud Williams, foreman of the Bar Circle, looked out with a lamp in his hand. He recognized Steve and, as his face darkened savagely, his hand fell to the gun at his hip.

But Steve, smiling his ironic smile, had the muzzle of a gun on Jud's belt buckle.

"I want to see Lucy, Jud," he drawled.

The eyes staring into his did not flinch, nor did the foreman swing aside.

"Shoot an' to hell with you!" said Jud grimly.

"She's kinda expectin' me," said Steve gently. "With your kind permission, I'll call her—Lucy!"

There was a little exclamation. Jud's voice boomed out in warning.

"It's Steve Galt!"

Lucy appeared, incredulously glad, trembling with relief.

"Steve!" she gasped. "They said—they said you were in jail and—they were going to lynch you—"

"I was, an' they were," said Steve in grim humor. "But I ain't, an' they ain't either, so far. Lookaheah! Don't wiggle,

Jud, or I'll blow hell outer you! I got two words for you, Lucy. One is, the sheriff says you ain't to go ridin' by y'self anywheah at any time for any reason. The folks that messed up your pa, they're right liable to be layin' for you. You to have somebody—two—three fellers—as guard all the time. Understan'?"

"Y-yes." Lucy was staring at him as if he were risen from the dead. "I—I'll do it, Steve, if you say so."

"I do say so," said Steve grimly, "An' one other thing. Comin' heah, skyhootin' with that message, I busted into three fellers herdin' up a coupla hundred white faces. They whistled at me an' shot when I didn't know the answer. On Bar Circle ground. They your men?"

She looked at Jud Williams who held the lamp steady as a rock and watched for the ghost of a chance to get out his gun.

"Are they—are they our men, Jud?"

"Rustlers, if Steve's tellin' the truth," said Jud grimly. "I let every man on the ranch go to town to attend to Steve heah. An' I ain't goin' after 'em. Either Steve or me is goin' to get killed tonight, now he's heah."

Steve's lips twitched in rather bitter amusement.

"If anybody, Jud," he said gently, "it's goin' to be you. In token whereof I'm takin' your gun." He did so. "I reckon you're goin' to lose some cattle tonight, Lucy; because I got me a idea somebody'll be turnin' up an' Jud an' me got to stay right heah an' stan' 'em off. I'm stayin' a while."

Lucy stared.

"You mean—"

"Right good time for a kidnappin," said Steve evenly, "tonight. It might occur to somebody else around heah. So I'm stayin'."

"But—but if the boys find you here when they come back," said Lucy anxiously, "they'll kill you! And—and your cousin Oliver is here now."

Steve's jaws clamped like steel traps.

"I reckon," he drawled coldly, "I'll talk to Cousin Oliver. Jud, walk on ahead o' me. Yeah, I'll talk to my 'fectionate cousin."

He forced the Bar Circle foreman to walk slowly before him down the hallway, into the room. Steve's cousin Oliver was there, white faced and with all the appearance of a man in hell. He gasped when Steve came into the room. But then, to Steve's utter and blank amazement, Oliver relaxed in such a let down of tension that he fairly collapsed into a chair.

Of all men, Steve had thought he would be least welcome. But instead of dismay, his cousin gave an inarticulate cry of relief and gazed at Steve with the most passionate, hell ridden gratitude that any man could express without words.

CHAPTER V

THE GALT BLOOD

STEVE regarded his cousin with a peculiar alertness as Oliver struggled to get back to complete self control. Oliver hadn't expected to see Steve. He was glad to see him. It looked as if he'd expected some one else he dreaded even more than Steve. And Steve began to race his brain to think who that could possibly be.

"Howdy, Cousin Oliver," he said dryly, "I kinda looked for you to start shootin' when you saw me. 'Nstead, it looks like you don't bear me no special grudge for livin'."

Oliver got a grip on himself with a terrific effort.

"N-no, Steve, I don't."

Lamplight on his face showed deep lines, curiously contradictory lines. Right now his features were composing themselves, after dread and an overwhelming relief. But marks of dissipation could be seen and marks of self indulgence and certain familiar lines that spoke of bitter unhappiness. And yet he stood straight and, if you overlooked a certain too alert air, he was likable enough. Steve examined him with a grimness that gradually lessened as a suspicion deepened.

"Theah's somethin' right funny in the

air, Oliver," he observed presently. "You looked gladder to see me than I was expectin'. Feel like talkin'?"

Oliver's eyes swung to him sharply. He had been looking at Lucy. Now he stiffened. His whole face hardened. Steve had to remember that Oliver was a couple of years younger than himself and hadn't had many toughening experiences to go through.

"I'm glad they didn't lynch you, Steve," he said carefully.

"Let's set," drawled Steve.

Oliver was upsetting, somehow, and there was that suspicion deepening in Steve's mind. Steve had been hating him cordially, but an idea that would not down tended to neutralize that hatred. He found himself remembering suddenly his father speaking solemnly many years before.

"He's all right at bottom. Us Galts generally are."

Steve's father had been speaking of Oliver's father. But it might apply to the son. Steve frowned meditatively.

"Oliver," he drawled. "You're my cousin. I started threatenin' to shoot you the other night. I meant it. I still mean it. But now Swain ain't around, us Galts might kinda get together an' kinda preserve the peace an' dignity of the family."

Oliver shook his head rather desperately.

"Too late, Steve."

"Shucks," said Steve, his suspicion mounting almost to a certainty. "Look at me. I been shot at by three separate gangs of folks today. I'm still alive. I ain't as good as new, but I'm in reasonable second hand order. We might patch up a kinda second hand peace."

"Too late," repeated Oliver.

Lamplight on his face showed him pale. He wasn't looking at Steve. Apparently he didn't dare to. But he glanced up at Lucy for the fraction of a second. A brand new hunch hit Steve so suddenly that he blinked. Oliver, looking at Lucy, looked like a man in hell—hopeless and despairing and rather horribly resolute about something.

There was a pause. Lucy opened her lips to speak but did not. Jud Williams watched Steve, savagely waiting for a chance at the man he thought had killed Lucy's father.

"Uh, Oliver," said Steve slowly, picking his words carefully and playing a hunch to the limit, "I'm askin' you for advice. I broke out o' jail jus' now. Theah's a gang huntin' me. I ought to be makin' for the hills. But you, now, what'd you advise me to do? Ought I wait heah a while?"

Oliver jerked his head up. His eyes met Steve's. They were agonized, pleading. He swallowed.

"Yes!" he said desperately. "My God! Yes!"

Steve relaxed. He knew two things now that he had not even suspected when he entered the room. Both of them were disturbing for more reasons than one. They needed thinking over. A good deal of thinking over.

He leaned back in his chair. Automatically one hand felt for his sack of tobacco. He seemed to feel Jud Williams tensing.

"Jud," drawled Steve without looking at him, "if you jump me, I ain't goin' to kill you. I'm goin' to put a bullet in each leg an' spank you!"

Jud relaxed sullenly. Steve pulled out his makings. He glanced at Lucy for permission to smoke. She was watching him with anxious, solicitous eyes.

"Are you—badly hurt, Steve?" she asked uncertainly.

"I'm hard to kill, Lucy," said Steve. "I'm minus a li'l epidermis an' I lost a lot o' convictions lately, but I'll do."

She hesitated.

"Isn't it—isn't it dangerous for you to stay here? When the boys come back from town—"

STEVE shook his head. He lay back in his chair and smoked, looking meditatively at his cousin. The trace of a frown appeared on his forehead from time to time. It was hard to work out. In the first place, he was pretty certain,

now, that Oliver was in love with Lucy. He knew it. And Oliver had been terrifically glad when he came and he had said that Steve ought not to leave. That meant that he was going to need help before long, on account of Lucy. And in its turn that meant that Lucy was going to need friends or defenders within the next few hours. The only question remaining was that of who Oliver could have been dreading to see when Steve entered.

Steve spoke suddenly.

"Two men killed in town tonight."

Lucy looked. But Steve was watching Oliver. There was a rather despairing hope in Oliver's eyes.

"Feller named Hamby," said Steve meditatively, "an' the sheriff."

Oliver looked down again, the hope gone from his expression.

"They say," drawled Steve, "I killed both of 'em. Right anxious to lynch me, they were. I sure got a bad reputation around heah."

Jud Williams' eyes were like glowing coals.

"You—you didn't?" asked Lucy unhappily.

"Kill 'em? No," said Steve, "neither one. But the evidence is pretty good against me. I hadda chance to kill one man I didn't, an' I'm kinda sorry. Swain."

The clamping of Oliver's jaw was the sign Steve had been watching for. He nodded thoughtfully to himself. His eyes grew shrewd.

"I reckon," he murmured, "things are shapin' up. Maybe for Steve Galt to get killed, an' maybe—"

He broke off, listening. He glanced at Oliver. Deathly, ghastly white. Steve's face took on a frozen, ironic smile.

"Jud," he drawled, "I'm goin' to give you back your gun. On your promise not to shoot me with it for five minutes."

"I won't promise a—"

"Yes, you will," said Steve. "Listen to them hawsses. Would Bar Circle men ride up real soft, real careful to make no noise?"

Jud listened. He stared at Steve, wild rage in his eyes.

"Your gang!"

For answer Steve tossed him the gun he had taken a few minutes before.

"You, Jud," he drawled, "you're goin' to squat by a window over theah. Oliver, he's goin' to occupy the parlor. I'll hold the door. Do all the shootin' you can, so's it'll seem like a lot of us heah."

Jud was already moving for a doorway.

"I don't know your game," he growled over his shoulder, "but I'm goin' to kill you afterwards for killin' Dick Harrison."

He vanished. They heard him easing up a window.

Oliver was looking at his guns. He carried two and he inspected them with a desperate resolution, though his hands were shaking and his whole air was that of a man who was damned and dying.

Steve touched his shoulder.

"Steady, Oliver," he said soberly. "I reckon we can fix this up afterwards."

There was the faintest shake of Oliver's head.

"Too late," he gasped, "but I'll fight."

"I reckon they'll whistle first."

A nod, so slight that even Steve could barely see it. Then Oliver moved away from Steve's hand. His face was ghastly. He went, lurching a little, toward the parlor. At the door he turned.

"I—I'll shoot straight," he said hoarsely. "Don't worry about that."

He vanished in his turn. Steve, remembering something, started suddenly and made an arrested gesture as if to call him back. Dick Harrison's body was in that parlor.

"Steve," said Lucy's voice at his elbow. It was a quiet little voice, and quite steady. "Is this—somebody come to—get me?"

"I reckon it is, Lucy," said Steve soberly. "They're figurin' on kidnappin' you. An' I'm right much scared you'd never get back. I'm glad I'm heah."

"You're going to fight them?" she asked, uneasily.

"Me an' Jud an' Oliver," admitted Steve, smiling.

She searched his face, very pale.

"I don't want you to risk your life any more," she said unhappily. "There's some dynamite in the toolshed, for blasting ditches. If Jud set off a few blasts, wouldn't that frighten them away?"

Steve smiled.

"Not hardly," he said mildly. "It'd look like theah was just a coupla fellers heah, an' right desperate. When all of us get shootin', though, we'll sound like a army."

HE OPENED the door of the hall leading to his own post.

"Theah ain't any hurry, though," he said suddenly. "They're goin' to whistle first. Lucy! Tell me somethin.' How come you don't think like Jud does? He thinks it's my gang comin.' Why don't you?"

Lucy managed a little smile.

"I told you," she said very steadily, "that I believed in you, that I never believed those stories they told about you."

Steve opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. His eyes wandered suddenly through the doorway leading to the parlor. An idea had come to him and a struggle began inside of Steve. Oliver wasn't what he'd thought. He was a Galt, and all the Galts were sound at bottom, and there had been no ugly stories to go the rounds about him. Steve had seen plainly that Oliver loved Lucy.

"But Lucy," said Steve, the beginning of a faintly mocking smile upon his lips. "I never could explain the evidence against me for killin' your father. Nobody'd believe me. Not even you. Y'ain't sure—"

Lucy looked at him gravely. She was pale, and she was far from any lessening of her grief over her father's death. Her hand touched Steve's sleeve.

"Steve," she said with a little catch in her voice, "would I—would I kiss my father's murderer?"

She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Oh, my Gawd!" he said unsteadily. "Oh, my Gawd!"

A whistle shrilled outside. A signal. They were waiting for a sign from somebody in the Bar Circle ranch-house that all was clear. Steve flung back his head with a queer shake.

"Now I'm goin' to raise hell sure 'nough," he said evenly. "Lucy, somethin's goin' to bust. Hell itself couldn't stop me now—"

He marched down the hallway to the door he had elected to guard. He opened it. He saw a bunched knot of horses and men, already assured of the emptiness of the bunkhouse—the cook had fled—and of the comparative desertion of the ranch.

Steve laughed out into the darkness with its spangled top of stars. He went out on the porch, both guns out, still laughing. And he suddenly went toward the knot of men at a run.

"Get outa heah!" he roared. "You, Block H men from Hell Sink, get outa heah before I take you an' spank you!"

A streak of fire spurted from one of his gun muzzles. A second followed the first. There was a spitting flame in answer. Then from two windows of the ranch-house came other spouting flames and crackling detonations.

In seconds the darkness was alive with gun flashes. Steve ran on, laughing uproariously, his guns bellowing. There was a crashing of glass, then another. The guns behind him came closer. Jud Williams and Oliver had come through the windows and were racing after Steve, their guns going savagely.

Horses screamed and reared madly, striking out with their hoofs. The close bunched knot of men split and, shooting, ducked from the running men. Then each man fancied himself the sole target of the three on foot.

As suddenly as if a prearranged order had been given, the riders of the night broke and fled. The drumming of their horses' hoofs was scattered and uneven. It grew thin and faint and died away.

Steve stopped and began to laugh again. Jud Williams came up to him grimly.

"Lookaheah," he said savagely. "I said I'd kill you for killin' Dick Harrison. Get out your gun!"

Steve continued to laugh.

"Shoot, Jud," he gasped. "Shoot away! Your gun won't go off! Theah ain't nothin' in Gawd's world can kill me now!"

"You crazy?" demanded Jud savagely. "I said I'm goin' t' kill you! Get out y'gun!"

Steve sobered himself with an effort.

"Point it at the ground an' pull th' trigger," he said curiously. "Gawd knows why, Jud, but I know it won't go off."

There was a little empty click in the darkness. Jud swore.

"Hell! I emptied it an' didn't reload! How'd y'know?"

"I didn't," said Steve hilariously. He sobered himself again and added, "But when one miracle's happened—"

"Y'drunk!"

"Yeah," said Steve quietly. "Drunker'n you'll ever be in your life, Jud. A jag that'll last a long time, too. Wheah's my cousin?"

Oliver came up, reloading. His teeth were chattering.

"I—I shot straight, Steve," he gasped. "I—I shot straight."

"Yeah," agreed Steve soberly. "You want t' be ridin' now?"

His attitude was quaintly paternal.

"Y-yes. I—I've got to!"

"I'll go with you," said Steve. "We're ridin' the same way. Those fellers won't be comin' back."

He led the way toward the house. Jud Williams had reloaded his gun by this time, and he followed with a weapon that would undoubtedly kill Steve if he aimed it and pulled the trigger. But Jud was somehow much too bewildered to think of killing Steve.

Lucy was waiting on the porch. Steve stood before her, with Duke's reins rather absurdly over his arm. He was acutely conscious of the other two men present.

"Goin' now, Lucy," he said awkwardly. "I—uh—somehow, I kinda think things're goin' to be straightened out soon."

"Yes, Steve." She was straining her eyes to look at him. They seemed full of tears. "Be—be careful."

"I got right much—" Steve's voice wavered, and he steadied it. "I got right much to live for, I think, Lucy. I'll be careful. An' please keep somebody handy around you. I'm hopin' to clear up a lot o' things in the next day or two, but please have somebody guardin' you."

He mounted. Oliver was already in the saddle. He rode away in Oliver's wake.

FOR PERHAPS a mile they rode together over the range. Steve noted that Oliver was not heading for the Block H, but for one of the passes into the hills, but he said nothing. At the end of the mile Oliver reined in.

"Where you going, Steve?" he asked hoarsely.

"With you," said Steve.

Oliver hesitated and then said desperately—

"You can't."

"You're goin' to Hell Sink, ain't you?"

There was silence. Perhaps Oliver nodded in the darkness. He was sitting with both hands on his saddlehorn. He seemed to be swaying a little where he sat.

"I'm thinkin'," said Steve quietly, "that you ain't cut out for rustlin', Oliver. Kinda sick of it, ain't you?"

His cousin's voice, when it came, was wrenched and rather pitiful.

"My God! Yes!"

"I reckon I can manage to get you out of it. I've been hatin' you right hard, Oliver, but it looks like I forgot somethin'. Us Galts—if things work out like I figure, I can get you clear of the mess."

"You can't get me clear," said Oliver hoarsely. "You can't!"

His horse reached down and nibbled at a bit of foliage within reach. Steve rolled a cigaret, thinking. He struck a match and lighted it.

"If you're thinkin' about you killin' Dick Harrison—"

There was a gasp. Oliver jerked his horse's head as if to bolt. Starlight glittered on a drawn weapon.

Steve flicked the match away.

"O' course I knew you did it," he said quietly. "I knew it back in the house yonder. I saw you lookin' at Lucy. You love her, an' you killed her father. Nothin' else would ha' made you look like that, not even bein' sent on ahead of the kidnappin' gang to signal 'em it was all clear. I know that too, o' course, an' I know that, lovin' Lucy, you were all set to fight 'em off instead. That was why you were so glad to see me. I was somebody else to help fight. An' for Dick Harrison again, when we rode away from the Bar Circle jus' now I saw the speckled legs of the hawss you're ridin'. I saw 'em once before, in a gun flash when you made me trade boots with you."

Oliver sat still on his horse. He groaned.

"Why—why didn't you tell Lucy?"

"Because I saw you were in hell already," said Steve gently, "an' I wanted to know how come. How'd it happen, Oliver?"

"I—I sent him a note, not signed," said Oliver hoarsely. "I told him to come to that shack and he'd find out how to keep from paying that old debt again. He came. And I—I told him I'd clear up the whole business and help break up the rustling besides, if he'd get Lucy to marry me. She—likes me, but she wouldn't—and he wanted to know how I could do what I offered. I—I was desperate, Steve. I wanted to get clear, and —there was Lucy—I started to tell him—and he pulled a gun on me and swore he'd see me hung!"

Steve puffed steadily on his cigaret.

"He always did hate rustlers," he said without a hint of irony. "A hot tempered cuss, Dick Harrison. He most likely would've shot you. So you shot him twice before you thought an' then went crazy for fear he'd live an' tell Lucy what you'd told him an' y'emptied your gun in him."

Oliver made a sound in his throat.

"An' you rid away," said Steve quietly, "an' saw a rider, a stranger. You made him trade boots with you, givin' him a money belt you'd taken from Harrison in a crazy idea of makin' it seem a robbery killin'. You'd just remembered that your tracks were in that shack, an' you couldn't make yourself go back an' mess 'em up."

"I—I was crazy, Steve," cried Oliver hoarsely. "I was crazy! If he'd told Lucy what I told him— But I can't stand it any longer, Steve. I'll go in town with you and tell the whole business! I'll tell everything I know—clear you and wipe out the rustling besides."

Steve smiled a trifle bitterly in the darkness.

"You wouldn't get a chance, Oliver," he said gently. "If I went in town with you, I'd be strung up before you c'd speak a word. An' Swain's men would see you didn't get a chance to say anything after. Us bein' sighted together would be a death warrant for the pair of us."

"I don't care any longer!" cried Oliver passionately. "I'm sick of it!"

Steve continued to smile faintly.

"WE'LL go to Hell Sink, Oliver," he drawled. "This heah is my lucky night. Swain's been runnin' the rustlin', I think. I'll kill Swain. For the honor of the family we'll tell us a few lies; an' after he's dead we'll prove he killed Dick Harrison. I been framed so much I reckon I know how it's done."

"But afterwards—"

"I don't reckon," said Steve quietly, "you can marry Lucy. I'm goin' to do that."

There was a long silence. Oliver's horse moved a little to browse on a second bit of foliage. Then Oliver reined him aside.

"Come on," he said hoarsely.

Steve followed as he sent his mount forward in a mad rush for the pass into the hills. They thundered together over the level range and up the gently rolling ground. The two horses' hoofs clattered on stone as the hills swallowed them. Sparks flashed from their hoofs as they went recklessly onward in pitch darkness. Oliver pushed the pace unmercifully,

riding in a peculiarly desperate silence. Steve followed closely.

They were far within the hills when Oliver reined in.

"Keep quiet when I talk," he said harshly. Steve could not see his face at all. "I'll be able to pass you in. But neither one of us will be likely to get out again."

"I'll take a chance on that," said Steve composedly. "This heah is my lucky night."

Oliver put spurs to his pinto horse again. He rode recklessly, and at a certain spot he whistled shrilly. There was an answer. He rode on. Steve followed again, searching with his eyes for the hiding place of the man who had been watching the way. He saw nothing but towering blank walls of stone. Oliver led on past the columnar edge of a mesa rising abruptly from a valley bottom.

"Hamby got killed back yonder this mornin'," Steve remembered suddenly. "I saw't."

Oliver went on at a savage, breathless, heedless pace. The two of them went whirling past the little pocket in which Steve had prepared to stand at bay. On, up a steep path and into a wide and placid valley bed in which herds of cattle grazed contentedly. There were cowhands riding, here, singing nasally to their charges.

"Hm," said Steve grimly. "This heah is some nerve! Night herdin' on account of rustlers in the hills, an' servin' as sentries for those same rustlers at the same time."

A rider hailed them.

"Howdy!"

It was the friendliest of hails, but it required an answer which Oliver gave. The rider slipped back to his herd and his singing. This was the perfection of a rustling scheme. A big cattle owner has too much to lose of his own to risk trying to rustle cattle on the side. But by that very fact it was a perfect cover. Steve's Uncle Peter would never be suspected of aiding rustling, by reason of his owning a sizable ranch of his own. But it was foolish even of him.

Steve frowned, trying to understand his uncle's folly. He would have a larger income until his rustling was uncovered, but the danger did not repay him for that, when it was considered that he would have quite a sizable income without any risk at all if he did no rustling whatever.

Steve gave it up. It was rank foolishness. But its folly had prevented suspicion up to now. These herds, for example, with their owner's hands guarding them against the rustling he himself directed. No one would ever dream that these herds and these riders covered the mouth of Hell Sink against discovery.

Steve rode at Oliver's stirrups through an opening which appeared magically as they headed toward what seemed to be blank cliff. It was black and cold and damp in this narrow slit in solid rock. The horses' hoofs echoed and reëchoed weirdly.

"Howdy," said a voice from utter obscurity.

"Me," said Oliver restlessly. "Say, I—"

"Swain's goin' to give you hell," the voice told him grimly. "The gang that went for that girl come back all shot up. Dozen men jumped 'em."

"Posse came to the ranch," explained Oliver uneasily. "I couldn't find our fellows to warn them. Posse hunting Steve Galt."

"Swain's goin' to give you hell," repeated the voice. "Who's with you?"

Oliver mumbled a name. It seemed to satisfy the watcher. The two riders moved on. They rode for rods in the echoing way, with only a thin ribbon of stars overhead. Then the way widened before them and the stars arched out above their heads. Hell Sink spread out before them.

There was a shack over at one side, in size quite large enough to serve as a duplicate of the Block H ranch-house, but altogether unpainted and rude. A rough fence divided the great opening into two unequal parts, and there was a corral close by the shack. Horses moved about. There was one bunch of ten or more animals, however, huddled together still saddled, as if recently ridden in.

Oliver reined in as if in a last minute shrinking from the desperate venture before the two of them.

"Swain'll hang out in that shack yonder?" drawled Steve.

"Y-yes," said Oliver hoarsely. "I—I'm coming with you—"

There was a shrill whistle behind them in the recesses of the crevasse from which they had just emerged. It was not a single high pitched note, but a succession of short blasts at which Oliver gasped.

"That's the alarm! They—they've just found out there's a stranger here!"

Steve nodded. He began to smile peculiarly.

"I reckon," he drawled, "that feller in the pass, he happened to know that when you gave my name, the feller it belongs to was somewheres else."

There were poundings of feet in the clumsily built shack. Men began tumbling from its exits, guns in hands. Some mounted. Others saw the dark, indistinct figures of the two on horseback. They ran toward them. Steve drew his two guns with an air of infinite deliberation. A shot whined over their heads.

"This heah is my lucky night," said Steve grimly.

His guns, both of them, belched flame.

CHAPTER VI

HELL SINK

DUKE shied sidewise as Oliver grabbed for his bridle. Steve's aim was spoiled as he was about to pour a hail of lead in the direction of the gathering figures.

"Come on!" gasped Oliver. "Swain hasn't gotten back yet! Come on!"

A gun went off somewhere. The bullet whined by Steve's shoulders and crashed against the cliff behind him.

Oliver was dragging frantically at Duke's bridle. Steve touched him with the spurs and he lunged forward, tearing Oliver's hand free. Then, together, the two horses swept across the open space, passing before but away from the running men. In twenty acres, though, there is not much hiding space for two men and two horses, when fifteen other men are hunting them.

"Fence here," panted Oliver. "Jump it!"

The pinto horse soared upward. Duke followed. A recumbent cow struggled to her feet with frantic bellowings and went high tailing it off into nowhere. Then there were cattle all about the two riders—sore and frightened and peevish cattle. Bar Circle steers that had had their brands blotted to Double Wheel and would presently have an entirely illegal transaction given the appearance of strict honesty by the painstaking cancellation of the blotted brand and an open and above board Block H. Lightning Bolt cows, which would presently share in the process, save that they would be branded to represent purchased stock from the Injun Head. And Skullbone stock, originally Lacy C, and Lazy Eights that had been branded as calves with the Crazy Fork.

Here was where cattle eased off their home ranges into the Block H herds were doctored into the semblance of cattle duly bought by Peter Galt. The coverage was perfect. The brand blotting was not the usual sort of thing at all. So far not one man had suspected the supposedly purchased stock. The only time of danger was the time when the brands were fresh, and here was a twenty acre hidden corral where two or three hundred head could be kept, if hay fed, while the branding burns healed over. And, of course, bought stock from other ranches could be readily and quietly sold by Peter Galt of the Block H when his own brand was on it.

The two horses wove in and out among the little knots of cattle in the darkness. Most of them were on their feet now, and all on their feet were moving, so the two riders bent low could hardly be seen in the dim starlight.

"This way!" panted Oliver. "Over to the house and leave your horse. There's a sort of cave under the cliff. Hide there—"

Steve had followed Oliver's orders

much more than he was accustomed to take orders from anybody. But with the sounds of pursuit behind him it was still wisest to follow as long as Oliver knew the ground and he did not. Men were already leaping their horses over the fence into the cattle corral, and other men were hunting savagely among the milling cattle.

He saw Oliver clamber over the fence again and he essayed to follow. His spurs caught in barbed wire, however, and when he alighted on the proper side, Oliver was nowhere to be seen.

Steve gazed about him. In Hell Sink, headquarters of the rustlers whose scapegoat he was to be, with at least fifteen men hunting him, and all the world outside savagely anxious to lynch him, Steve was in no particularly enviable situation.

"Swain ain't heah, though," he murmured softly, "an' if I'm t'do Lucy any good, I' got to get him an' Uncle Peter both, or make 'em do some plain an' fancy explainin'."

The hiding place Oliver had intended was lost in the double darkness of the night and the shadows cast by the encircling cliffs. Steve stood sturdily in the starlight, smiling faintly, listening to the noise of the men who searched for him so earnestly.

"I reckon it's the bunkhouse for me," he drawled.

Seconds later he was inspecting its interior from the crack of a door partly ajar. It was empty. He slipped inside, gun in hand, and surveyed it coolly. Bunks from floor to ceiling; greasy, unkempt . . . chairs and tables . . .

Somebody touched one of the doors from outside. Steve leaped, catlike, for that door. It opened hesitantly and a man came in timorously.

"Theah's a gun in your ribs," drawled Steve. "Don't squawk!"

A bleating noise came from the figure Steve's gun pressed against. And Steve turned it around in sudden grim suspicion. It was Miguel.

"H'llo," said Steve dryly. "You in cahoots heah too?"

"*Dios y todos los santos!*" Miguel choked, his eyes starting from his head.

"Yeah," said Steve, in ironic humor. "Gawd an' all his saints! I'm heah. What's you doin' heah?"

"I," Miguel smiled with an ashen face, "I, Estebanito, I had to work weeth these men or be keeled. So I worked. But keeling ees not to my taste, so when they went to look for you, I came here."

" 'Fraid of bullets, more likely," pointed out Steve calmly. "Wheah's a good hidin' place until Swain comes. Quick!"

"*Dios mio!*" gasped Miguel. "Take away thee gun, Estebanito! Eet might go off!"

Steve jammed it further into the ribs of the shrinking man.

"Wheah's a good hidin' place?" he demanded.

"I—*oh, madre de*—"

Somebody else was coming. Several men, growling.

"One o' those hawsses was Oliver's," one was snarling. "That pup's goin' to get killed, Swain or no Swain."

A TUMULT set up at the mouth of the pass through the rock. The men outside halted. Steve could hear a murmur.

"Swain's come back. It's Swain. There's the fellers!"

Steve's lips were close to Miguel's ear as he murmured:

"One li'l squawk an' Juana's goin' to be a fat widow, Miguel. You come 'long with me."

Soundlessly he urged his quaking erstwhile nurse across the shack. There was a door there. The two of them slipped noiselessly out of it. Steve shook his head impatiently. No windows on this side. He could hear, but not see. Steve flattened himself against the wall just as there were two shots and a smothered yell, and then a rushing of men.

They came back, in their midst a dark figure struggling.

"They got Oliver," said Steve coolly. "But I reckon he's just as safe, right now, with them as with me. An' Swain's coming."

With a trampling of hoofs, half a dozen men swept up to the shack and dismounted. Steve heard Swain's voice.

"What's the matter?"

A voice snarled accusations. The men sent to raid the Bar Circle had been jumped by a dozen men, and Oliver had given them no warning. He had ridden into Hell Sink with a man, nobody knew who, but a stranger. The guard in the passage had reported it, and they had found his horse.

Steve was close to admiration for Swain when he heard him merely ask briefly—

"What's th' hawss like?"

They told him, describing Duke with perfect accuracy. And then Swain bellowed:

"Y'fools! That's Steve Galt's hawss! He's in the Sink heah! I been chasin' him with half the range, an' the rest of the mob's over at Miguel's house now, hopin' he'll've gone theah! Miguel tol' me what his hawss looked like! Steve Galt's in the Sink!"

Steve, on the other side of the shack, heard his voice subside only to crack out savagely,

"You, Buck! Half a dozen men with you! Go to th' pass mouth an' build a big fire theah! You watch to see Steve Galt don't get out. Bring Oliver in the shack!"

He stamped inside, snarling wordlessly. Steve, with Miguel beside him with his teeth chattering like castanets, whispered softly—

"So you tol' Swain what my hawss looked like hey?"

"*Por el amor de Dios, Estebanito!*" panted Miguel.

"Shut up!" drawled Steve. "I'm learnin' things."

Voices were inside the shack now, growling. Swain's voice, then Oliver's, hoarse and high pitched. Many men were in the shack. The door through which Steve had slipped out was fast now. Two men were leaning against it.

"I don't give a damn!" Oliver was crying. "I'm sick of it! When you want to carry Lucy off I'm through!"

"You're through when I'm through with you!" snarled Swain. "Not before! You're in this as deep as anybody! But, by Gawd, if I didn't need you I'd kill you now!"

"I swear I'm through," came Oliver's voice in panting desperation. "Do what you like! I won't cover up anything any more! I'm finished!"

There was a pause. Steve, outside, could estimate the savage glare with which Swain was regarding Oliver.

"Yeah?" he purred, his voice thick with rage. "You won't cover up nothin' else, hey? Well, when I don't need y'any more, I'll kill yuh! But listen t'me! Steve Galt's in the Sink heah. The way out is guarded. He can't get away. We'll hunt 'im down an' kill him by daylight. An' the Bar Circle men are huntin' Steve Galt at Miguel's. While they're theah, I'm goin' over to the Bar Circle an' bring Lucy heah! A dozen men jumped the gang I sent before? Theah wasn't but two men at the ranch. The rest of 'em are still huntin' Steve! I'll bring Lucy heah, an' you'll do just what I say as long as you want to have her live. An' if y'try t' double cross me, I'll make you beg me on your knees to kill her!"

Steve's hand on Miguel's shoulder closed so savagely that a gasp of pain was wrenched from him. Steve was deathly white from pure rage. His eyes were burning flames. But his brain was working with clocklike precision. Before he could get the door open, with two men leaning against it, there would be a dozen guns out and trained on it. There were no windows on this side of the shack. And if he left Miguel, Miguel would howl; only the utter paralysis of completest terror held him silent now.

"Slim!" barked Swain. "Pete! Kid! Hennesy! Watch this feller! The rest of you—*venga conmigo!*"

Steve rushed. A howl of terror burst from Miguel as the grip on him was released. Steve went tearing around the corner, his guns out and killing in his heart. The threats against Lucy were ringing in his mind.

He stopped with a growl of rage. The shack that was used as a bunkhouse was nowhere far from the cliffside. Here it touched the sheer wall. It would be waste of time to try to climb. Steve turned and, panting curses, went raging to go the other way.

HE ROUNDED the corner of the shack quite forty feet from the door, and Swain and his followers were sixty yards away and no more than a blurred moving mass in the densest shadow of the cliff wall. To fire into the bunch was merely to waste lead and throw away what slight chance of usefulness remained to him. Steve did not reason that out consciously. On the contrary, he came to himself much later, when he was running desperately in the attempt to overtake them on foot.

He saw the clump of men ride into the circle of firelight that now spread out from a leaping blaze by the entrance way. The fire was to guard against his own escape. The riders, with Swain at their head, swept past the firelight all of three hundred yards from Steve, and not one of them was exposed to his guns for more than a matter of seconds. The last of them plunged into the blackness of the passage as Steve discovered the futility of his attempt at pursuit.

He drew up, panting and wild with rage. His guns, in his hands, were no better than so many playthings. A group of the denizens of Hell Sink were on the way to kidnap Lucy.

"I got to beat 'em to it," drawled Steve in icy coolness, "which means a hawss an' a bust through fight."

Seconds later he was hunting for Duke amid uneasy cattle. But Duke was a wise horse in the ways of cows and cowmen. He was waiting more or less patiently hard by the fence where Steve had deserted him and where he had been seen by those who had been hunting for Steve. Close to him was Oliver's pinto horse.

Steve's eyes narrowed.

"Five to one is bad odds," he said shortly, "but five to two ain't so tough."

He went over the fence once more to the shack. And he flicked open the door without warning, stepped inside and said curtly—

"Stick 'em up!"

Two men obeyed. A third was engaged in completing the tying up of Oliver. He swung around and his arms shot skyward as Steve's left hand gun waved suggestively toward him. The fourth tumbled out of a bunk with his gun swinging into line. His shot and Steve's sounded almost together; but Steve's weapons were again covering the three remaining men an instant later, while the man who had fired at him was lying quite still on the floor.

"Untie Oliver," drawled Steve. "Us Galts got to stick together."

Scowling and uneasy, a man reluctantly obeyed.

"Take his gun, Oliver," said Steve grimly, "an' tie him up, him an' th' others."

Oliver, trembling, obeyed.

"Steve," he gasped, "they've gone—for—"

"Lucy," finished Steve coolly. "Yeah. I heard 'em. Now we're goin' after them. Come on."

He it was who took the lead, now. The guns from the four men in the shack they carried with them. They went swiftly for the fence, scrambled over it and mounted.

"Now listen, Oliver," drawled Steve. "Maybe both of us won't get through heah. This's what's got to be done." He gave succinct orders. "An' remember, Lucy don't have to know who killed her pa. Us Galts can stick together some ways. Even the black sheep of the family can see that."

The two horses took off, raced together and landed with simultaneous thumpings on the soft earth beyond the fence. There they swerved, one to the right and the other to the left, and galloped ever onward in the darkness.

Steve, with the clattering echo of Duke's hoofbeats pounding in his ears from the cliff beside him and above him,

could see that the guards at the passage were alarmed. There was the glitter of firelight on polished steel.

Then there was a thin, defiant yell from far away and the staccato clatter of a horse's hoofs on rock. Oliver had reached his agreed post and was coming on. Steve let out a wild whoop and touched Duke with his spurs. Duke bounded forward, mane flying, hoofs crackling on the rotted detritus at the cliff's base, racing for the fire at the topmost speed of which he was capable.

One man against five is bad odds, but two against the same number is not nearly so desperate. There was a little carmine spark, followed by a spiteful crackle. It was Oliver's gun. It was answered by a volley. But Oliver, like Steve before him and Swain and his men before that, was keeping to the deepest shadow of them all, the abysmal black that hung about the cliffside's lower edge. The hoofs of the pinto horse kept on.

Duke was going like a whirlwind. Five men were waiting for Steve to make a break for the passage. A great fire was kept up to make a target of him when he should try. But now two men were racing for the firelight from diametrically opposite directions, and both men were coming shooting. The unexpectedness of that maneuver and the difficulty of adjustment to meet it cut down the effectiveness of the five by a great deal.

They began to shoot, aiming at the sound of the running horses or, more often, at spots where ironshod hoofs had struck sparks from stones beneath them. And their gun flashes marked them down to the two riders.

They came into view on the same instant; two men, bent low in their saddles, guns out and suddenly bellowing as the firelight tinted their mounts with its carming glow. The pinto horse was racing for the fire, its legs twinkling and its eyes rolling. Duke, coal black and the fire gleaming on his glistening coat, came into view like dark thunder. In mighty bounds he rushed upon the defenders of the pass, and from either side of his head it seemed that a solid stream of fire poured forth. Steve's guns drenched with lead the spots from which gun flashes had previously come.

A clatter, a roaring of guns, the scream of a man as a horse went over him!

Duke and the pinto horse went thunderously down the narrow way with the little lane of stars overhead and the reverberating echoes on either side. Steve was not smiling now. His features were set and grim. He was reloading swiftly. He heard the other horse following with sturdy strides, and he did not think to worry about Oliver. He was solely concerned with getting to the Bar Circle, with organizing a defense or arranging Lucy's quick departure before the men from Hell Sink swooped down upon her.

A gun went off in the blackness around the watcher of the way. Steve sent a literal flood of lead in reply. The air seemed full of flying rock fragments and whistling, screaming slugs of metal that had been bullets until they struck unyielding stone. Oliver did not fire, but the pinto horse came on steadily. On and on, galloping through sheer opacity.

The open air suddenly, with cattle grazing somnolently, raising long white faces to stare stupidly at the two horses. Steve's guns glittered in the starlight. He watched for the night herds. There was none.

"Rid off with Swain," said Steve grimly. "C'mon, Oliver. Swain's got enough men to wipe out the whole Bar Circle, if he takes 'em by surprise."

Thundering, racing onward, with the pinto horse following swiftly behind, Steve did not notice that Oliver did not answer at all. He heard the horse and felt the presence of the rider. That was all. Steve was thinking desperately that Swain and his hands would have a good start—a quarter of an hour. Maybe more. They would have as imperative a need for speed as those behind them. Swain knew that the Bar Circle should still be deserted. Its riders should not yet have returned from their hunt for Steve. But even so, it was a daring and

even a desperate undertaking to swoop out of the hills to snatch Lucy from under their very noses. Swain needed her to force Oliver. Of course, Oliver could spoil the game by talking freely, but that was not enough, perhaps. There was Steve's Uncle Peter.

SWAIN would be hurrying, though. And with the start he had, and the greater familiarity of his mounts with the trail, he should make better time. Steve and Oliver would reach the Bar Circle too late.

Steve swore in a cold and even voice. All these items added together meant that he and Oliver would ride up to, into and through the crowd of Hell Sink men. They would have the advantage of surprise. They were both believed to be safely guarded against the possibility of any such attempt to spoil Swain's plans. But there would be only the two of them against the ten men or more with which Swain had started out; and he had added the night herd riders to his force, two or three more. Two men against a dozen.

An idea, a rather desperate one, came into Steve's head. He reined in, not to lose speed, but to allow Oliver to come alongside.

"Lookaheah, Oliver," he said crisply, "if we catch up to those fellers, whether before or after they raid the Bar Circle, we ride in 'mongst the hindmost. An' we pick 'em off one by one."

That could be done. A party of horsemen making haste will not ride as a compact mass, but with the slower horses straggling behind. Inevitably there will be stragglers. Inevitably, however compact the leading group, there will be other riders tailing by tens and even hundreds of yards. And even the rearmost straggler, especially at night, will never be sure that there is not another of his own party still behind him.

The two riders, coming up from behind without signs of hostility, could pinch off the tail end man and then the next and the next. With each man disposed of, the risk would become greater, but it was not beyond possibility that they might unsaddle half the Hell Sink gang before it came to shooting it out against the remainder.

"You get it, Oliver?" asked Steve crisply. "Pick 'em off one by one as we catch up to 'em?"

There was no reply. Steve saw Oliver reel in his saddle. He had the saddlehorn clutched fast. He was bent low over it. But he lurched now one way and recovered slowly, and now the other.

Steve heard him sob suddenly like a man whose heart has broken in his breast. He fell slowly, with even a seeming deliberation, out of the saddle. The pinto checked and reared as its rider went crashing to the earth, then stood still trembling.

Steve was on the ground in an instant. He saw the whites of his cousin's eyes, searching desperately for him.

"I'm heah," said Steve briefly.

"Got me," gasped Oliver, "by the firelight. I—I thought I—could get killed—fighting for Lucy." He sobbed again. "I wanted—to do something—right."

"Y'done it, Oliver," said Steve quietly. "Us Galts are gen'rally all right at bottom."

" 'Didn't tell you everything, Steve," gasped his cousin. "Even you'd have killed me." He fought for strength. "If —you're too late at the Bar Circle, Swain'll wait until morning before he harms Lucy. He'll think I've just—tried to break away again. Done it—before. Couldn't stick it out. Something rotten in me, I guess, Steve. I should have been the black sheep. Get a posse and raid Hell Sink. I'm going . . ."

He seemed to choke a little. He was still.

Steve watched grimly for the fraction of a second. He had turned to remount when he heard the faintest of murmurs.

"Now I lay me down to sleep . . . God, I'm sorry I killed Lucy's fa—"

Steve, all grimness and cold composure, felt his heart when the voice died away once more. It had stopped.

Steve remounted.

"If I see daylight, Duke," he said evenly as Duke bounded madly ahead at the touch of the spurs, "if I see daylight, I'll come back heah an' get him an' see he's buried right. But if I don't—"

He bent low in the saddle.

"Shake a hoof, Duke! Show me some speed! We got doin's t' do!"

And then there was but a single horse going swiftly through the darkness and awakening the echoes of the hills with the thunderous pounding of his hoofs on rock.

Down the last incline; breasting sage and mesquite on the rolling open range. Minutes of breathless rushing through the cool and starlit night. Myriad strained eyes and acutely listening ears, questing the semblance of an indication of other riders ahead.

And then a glow of light in the distance, the faintest flicker of a single lamp, a long distance away. The Bar Circle. Steve sent Duke toward it, calling upon him for the last ounce of his strength for the making of speed. Now was the time for recklessness, for the casting aside of all considerations but the necessity of getting to the Bar Circle at the earliest conceivable instant. Somehow, though Steve expected at any instant to hear the crackling of firearms that would mean Swain's raiding party had reached the ranch before him, the stillness and quietness reassured him.

Half a mile away he emptied a gun into the air. As he rushed on, he began to shout,

"Lucy! Lucy! Steve comin'! Get a hawss! Quick! Lucy!"

Over and over he shouted it. There was no answer. No sign of a movement. No obscuring of the single light that would have told him some one heard and was moving about within.

Duke flung himself gallantly through the blackness. Steve, shouting madly, leaped the house fence and thundered up to the ranch-house porch. Silence. Stillness.

"Lucy! Lucy!"

The door was open, the same door from which he had come out laughing to rout the first attempt of the Hell Sink gang to kidnap Lucy. There was a sudden horrible air of emptiness.

With a ghastly feeling of impotence Steve dismounted. He pushed the door wider. He went in. In the room where the light still glowed he saw Jud Williams lying on the floor. He had been shot through the head. A chair had been overturned, as if in a struggle. The house shrieked of emptiness.

Sudden beads of sweat came out on Steve's forehead. Lucy had been carried off by Swain to be used as a threat against Oliver. And when Swain would go back to Hell Sink and find that Oliver had shot his way out with Steve.

"I said awhile ago," drawled Steve, speaking through stiff lips, "that this heah was my lucky night. Now I got to get me a posse to fight a way into Hell Sink an' clean it up. An' theah ain't a man in the county won't shoot me on sight. Black sheep!"

A distant, infinitely faint drumming noise arrested him. He went quickly to the door. It was horses, still a long distance away. They were coming toward the ranch, Bar Circle men, returning from an unavailing search for Steve, which search had had as its object his lynching. They would find him here. He had to stay here and take them with him to Hell Sink to help him fight. And they would greet him with howls of savage joy.

CHAPTER VII

ROPE FOR TWELVE

STEVE had made some rather desperate preparations when the horsemen rode in five minutes later. They came in quietly, almost furtively. Lucy had made no secret of her belief in Steve's innocence after she had recovered from the simultaneous shocks of learning of her father's death and Miguel's bland announcement of a message to her. The men who had ridden after Steve had done so in defiance of her orders, but in loyalty to her dead father. Now, coming back

unsuccessful from their hunt, they rode in silence.

"Maybe," observed one grimly, "we're fired, boys. We better not unsaddle till we heah."

There was a moment's hesitation.

"She'll send Jud over to the bunkhouse," said somebody uneasily. "I—uh—I ain't anxious to have her ask me what we done."

Tacitly, the statement was accepted and approved. Men dismounted stiffly, dropped their horses' reins over their heads, and moved toward the bunkhouse. There were few comments. None, in fact. Every man felt that his job might be gone. Every man felt that he would not regret his job if, previously, he could have had a hand in Steve Galt's lynching. But Steve had slipped out of their hands, and the ignominy of being locked in the jail while he rode peacefully away still rankled.

Some one opened the bunkhouse door. One by one the riders drifted inside.

In the blackness of the interior a match was struck, disclosing all the boarded interior, the bunks against the wall, the occasional magazine picture tacked against the planking. The man with the match lighted the lamp very carefully. The others were uneasily silent.

The chimney went back on the lamp. At the sudden brightening of its flame Steve spoke.

"Say, you fellers." He drawled it coldly, grimly. "I wish you'd call in the others. I got somethin' to say."

There was an instant's silence, due to sheer incredulity. The men stared at him, jaws falling open in blank unbelief that Steve actually sat before them, puffing quietly on a cigaret which until the lighting of the lamp he had held cupped behind his hand.

As one man, every man in the place dropped his hand to his hip.

"Call in the other fellers," drawled Steve again. "I got somethin' to say."

He made no move toward his own guns, but the tautness of his lips and the tightness with which his jaw was clamped was proof that he was not as indifferent as his pose would have suggested.

"Damn!" gasped somebody. "Hey, fellers! Steve Galt's in heah!"

The door was jammed by bodies forcing their way in. There were a dozen guns out now, and every one bearing on Steve. He puffed steadily, regarding the lot of them with a peculiar, grim calmness. It wasn't desperation. Somehow it suggested an ace up his sleeve. But they did not notice that.

"You better listen to me," he drawled. "You got me covered, an' Gawd knows I didn't have to wait for you to come an' find me. Likewise, I could ha' done a lot o' shootin' as yo all come in the door."

"Listen, hell!" snarled somebody. "You killed Hamby an' the sheriff tonight an' Dick Harrison before!"

"No," drawled Steve, "I been doin' some shootin' tonight, an' maybe I killed somebody. I tried, right earnest. But I didn't kill those three men." He paused. "I did my shootin'," he drawled, "in Hell Sink. Rustlin' headquarters."

There was a stirring. Then a savage—

"Get a rope—"

"Wait a minute," drawled Steve. "You got your guns on me. You can pull your triggers when you like. I got somethin' to say. I want to tell you, first, how cattle's been rustled around heah. Bar Circle cattle."

He returned his cigaret to his mouth and began to roll another, unhurriedly.

"In rustlin' from the Bar Circle," he drawled, "the first thing to do is get the cattle away. This range, thank Gawd, ain't yet got to the stage o' bein' fenced in. Theah're Bar Circle cows on the Block H, an' Block H cows on th' Bar Circle. Likewise, theah're Bar Circle cows on the Lightnin' Bolt range, an' on the Lacy C an' Crazy Fork range, too. In li'l bunches. Two, three head. Maybe ten 'r twelve. Not enough to risk stealin'. But they get stole."

He paused to lick the new cigaret. If he told them now that Lucy had been kidnapped, they would kill him.

"I tell you how they get stole," he

went on evenly. "Theah's a ranch around heah wheah those cattle get rebranded. You fellers been drivin' y'own cattle, with blotted brands, for a neighbor—"

"He's talkin' for time," said some one briefly. "That don't make sense. Get a rope!"

"It does make sense," said Steve gently. "I'm pointin' out that my Uncle Peter, he's bought some Double Wheel stock, an' a Bar Circle makes a right good Double Wheel. He's bought, maybe, a coupla hundred Double Wheel cows. But he's runnin' five 'r six hundred head Double Wheel canceled an' rebranded Block H."

That got their attention. He could see their faces change as it worked itself out in their minds.

"Hell's bells!" gasped somebody. "Maybe it's the truth! Theah're a lot o' them rebranded cows."

There was a buzz of talk. But few eyes turned away from Steve, and no guns at all came down.

"How come you're tellin'?" demanded a tall man grimly. "Hadda fuss with y'gang?"

"They ain't my gang," said Steve gently. "Me an' Oliver, we shot our way out through part of 'em just now, me hurryin' heah."

"YOU TELL us," suggested the tall man as grimly as before, "how to find this Hell Sink that you say is rustlin' headquarters. Maybe what you're tellin' is the truth an' maybe it ain't. But it is the truth that you killed three men lately an' we been huntin' all over for you."

"You lynch me," agreed Steve evenly. "Yeah. Well, heah's the way to get to Hell Sink."

He told them concisely. There was a savage growl.

"Damn' lie," snapped the tall man. "I've been by theah a dozen times. Th'ain't no openin' theah a-tall. Swain usual' has a bunch o' cows grazin' in Big Valley. Y'lyin'! Somebody get a rope!"

"Lyin' 'r not," said Steve evenly. "Lucy's theah. Swain took her theah half a hour, maybe, ago."

He lit his fresh cigaret from the butt of the old one as that statement sank home and stopped the buzz of talk as if a hand had been clapped over every man's mouth. Then there was an outburst.

"What y'tellin' us—why, y'dam' fool, think we'll believe that?"

It was an uproar. Some one plunged outside and came back with a rope. Guns bore steadily on Steve.

"Jud Williams," said Steve quietly, "is lyin' on the sittin' room floor with a bullet in his head. Theah' a coupla chairs turned over, like Lucy put up a scrap. Go an' look."

The quietness, the positiveness of his tone carried enough conviction to be momentarily staggering. The bunkhouse was in an uproar. Half the men in the place wanted to go and see. The other half wanted to lynch Steve first. And those who wanted to go and see were only deterred by their own determination to be present when Steve was disposed of.

Steve watched them with coldly flaming eyes. He was in a passion of impatience. He was cold all over with the thought of what might be happening to Lucy while he delayed. But if he had told these men at the outset that Lucy had been carried off, there was no power on earth that would have kept them from killing him as the author of that disaster. He had been forced to delay, to try to convince them by the explanation of the rustling scheme, to gain some sort of hold upon their ability to believe. He had to have men to fight with him. He had to have these men. And he had to convince them somehow.

Three men plunged out of the door to look in the ranch-house. The hubbub in the bunkhouse continued.

"I tell you," roared the tall man, "he's lyin'. It's some scheme o' his'n. He wants to git us away from heah so his gang can come in an' clean up the whole range."

One of the three men came back, choking on his wrath.

"It's so!" he gasped. "Jud's dead an' Miss Lucy's gone, an' heah's one damned murderer that's goin' too!"

Somebody caught his arm.

"No you don't!" was the roar. "If he killed her, we're all goin' to have a han' in killin' him! Heah! The rope!"

"You fools!" cried Steve bitterly. "You damn' fools! Don't y'see what I'm tryin' to do? Lucy's in Hell Sink! I've just come from theah! I'm askin' you to come with me an' get her out! By mornin'—my Gawd! Think what might happen to her before mornin'! I'll go with you! I'll let you take me with a rope aroun' my neck! I'll hang, an' thank you, if y'only get her out first."

The other two men came back from the ranch-house, white faced and with burning eyes.

"Let me get at him," panted the first. "He killed her pa, an' now—"

The second, wordless, was making toward Steve with his hands working convulsively.

Steve stepped back a pace. A box that his body had hidden was revealed, a mate to the box that had been taken into Dos Aguas to blow down the jail door. It was dynamite.

"Stand back!" snapped Steve savagely. "By Gawd, I come heah to get me a posse! I've got authority from the sheriff. I'm a deputy sheriff of this heah county. Heah's my 'thority!" He flung the scribbled paper the sheriff had given him, across the room. "I deputize you fellers to help me clear up Hell Sink! Who's comin' peaceable? I come for a posse, an' I'm goin' to get one if I have to carry you theah roped to y'hawsses!"

He stood tense, outlined in the lamplight, his fingers holding the glowing tip of his cigaret over the box of explosive.

"Shoot!" he said grimly, "an' the light heah will drop on a pile of fuses, all capped an' crimped an' ready! You all will follow me to Hell Sink or you'll follow me to hell!"

A roar, a growl of rage came from the men who faced him. Steve picked up the box, still holding his cigaret above its contents.

"I'm goin' outside," he drawled coldly. "I'll wait for volunteers for my posse. If they don't come, I reckon I'll toss a coupla sticks back in heah."

Box in hand, cigaret glowing, he moved toward the door. There were a dozen men in the bunkhouse, and any one of them could have shot him. Every one of them longed desperately to kill him. But though the gun muzzles followed his every movement, though fingers trembled with hatred upon triggers, he reached the door and backed out of it, still smiling ironically, without harm.

"The windows!" panted the tall man. "We c'n rush him."

There were thuds as the separate windows were simultaneously attacked; then roars of rage as they resisted. The stout wooden shutters outside were shut fast and apparently nailed fast beyond the possibility of being forced. Huge spikes showed where they had been nailed.

"Quit that," came Steve's cool voice outside. "One o' you come out."

A moment's impotent rebellion, and a man rushed the door, guns ready.

A shot boomed instantly.

"Right bad manners," Steve drawled, outside. "Stan' up an' let me take your gun."

Two more men rushed and two more shots boomed. One of the two fell back inside.

"I think," drawled Steve, "I think he's creased. But maybe I killed 'im. He made me hurry some."

The sound of movements without. The slithering sound of ropes.

The tall man whispered, panting with rage—

"All of us, shootin' at once."

The volley went off thunderously. The door was splintered by the bullets. There was silence for a little space.

"Try that again," said Steve grimly, "an' I'll chuck a stick o' dynamite inside. I'm busy. Ain't got time for foolin'." A pause. "Next!" he said dryly. "All set for another customer!"

THERE were howling, raging defiances from within. The Bar Circle men were thirsting for Steve's blood. To submit tamely one by one to capture by the men they had ridden hours to lynch was too much.

"Your friends out heah," Steve pointed out grimly, "will be tellin' you in a minute that the dynamite box is on the roof of the bunkhouse. I'm lightin' a time fuse now. If you all ain't out before it goes off, it'll be your funeral, not mine. But come one at a time."

There was dense blackness outside the bunkhouse, and in that blackness Steve was sheltered completely. A man came out, apoplectic with fury. He was tied up, swearing savagely. Another . . . another . . . Every man came out hopeful of getting a shot at Steve, willing to risk his life ten times over to get a shot at him. Every man, coming from the lighted bunkhouse, found a gun stuck in his ribs before he had ceased being blind as a bat, and found himself being swiftly rendered helpless.

And above the heads of the bound men, a little fuse sputtered and fizzed agitatedly. Those who were most recently bound were too full of wrath to notice it. They filled the air with sulphurous language until mounting rage rendered them speechless. Each man had had a private little trick he had hoped would get Steve. Each man had been covered too promptly and bound too expeditiously for his little trick to work.

"Next," drawled Steve. "I ain't but one barber, but theah ain't no waitin'. Come on out.'

"Come in an' get me," snarled a last, defiant voice from the interior.

There was a smashing sound and the tinkling of broken glass. The interior of the bunkhouse was in darkness.

Steve waited.

"Comin' out?" he asked mildly.

The answer was a veritable triumph of insult, to which Steve listened unmoved. He even smiled faintly.

"I'll shoot it out with you for what you called me," he drawled, "after this heah affair is over. Meantime, maybe friends c'n persuade you to come out. The fuse is gettin' kinda short."

The bound and swearing men on the ground looked up at the sputtering fuse. It was inches only away from the box. Steve struck a match to let them see it.

"If't goes off," he observed grimly, "besides messin' up the bunkhouse, it'll do some damage to the rest of you."

Growls of rage answered him, then roared imprecations.

"C'mon out, damn you, Sam!" snarled a man on the earth. "This feller's crazy enough to let it go off. We'll kill 'im later. But come on out or he'll blow us t' hell."

A figure catapulted from the doorway. Steve plunged to meet him. Guns met and clattered together. And then, quite suddenly, there were not two figures, but one writhing mass that was two men in the most deadly of battles.

Steve fought in savage silence. Not only his own life, but Lucy's, hung on the issue of this battle with a man who would have died to serve her, who, as a matter of fact, was putting forth his last ounce of strength to begin her avenging. The other man's gun was lost. Steve, his own held firm in spite of the other man's struggle to wrench it away, could not shoot because he needed this man to fight for him.

Over and over on the ground, striking savage, merciless blows at the shortest of short range, using every trick fair and foul that the roughest of rough and tumble fighting could condone, the only sound was the gasping of their breaths. They reeled over the prone figures of the bound men, who stared upward hungrily, snarling encouragement to Steve's antagonist. They came down with a crash upon a man who was straining his eyes to see the battle. Steve and his opponent gasped for breath, but the men on the ground below them yapped like hungry wolves for Steve's downfall.

And then, stamping on the prostrate figures, exerting every atom of their strengths in a last titanic effort, they

went reeling to the sound of blows. They were lost to view in the shadow of the bunkhouse's overhanging eaves. Suddenly from the midst of the writhing, gasping tumult there came a sharp incisive *crack!*

A figure staggered away from the scene of conflict. The figure reached up to the sputtering fuse. As its figures were illuminated by the vivid little sparkles of light, the end of the time fuse came. The instantaneous fuse flashed up brilliantly.

The fuse was jerked loose and went flaming through the air, blindingly bright.

"An' thus," said Steve unevenly, "thus endeth the first lesson." He was panting for breath. "Gentlemen, you all are now duly deputized assistants of a deputy sheriff of this heah county. You all are a posse, authorized to ride, look, see an' make arrests, an' even to use such force as may be necessary for the maintenance of the peace an' dignity of this heah sovereign State. It is an honor to serve the State. I hope you all appreciate it. I'm goin' to rope you in your saddles."

HE MOVED away. The trampling of horses' hoofs followed him on his return.

"Right thoughtful of you all not t' unsaddle," he told them dryly. "It helps out a lot. Heah, feller!"

He jerked a man to his feet. He fumbled with a rope for a moment or two, and then cut loose his ankles.

"Get on board y'hawss," he ordered pleasantly. "If you try to duck away kindly observe I got a rope around your neck an' I'll pull you off again."

The man mounted, swearing.

"'Nother one, please," said Steve grimly. "I come heah for a posse. I'm gettin' me one. You, suh, if you please."

Another man jerked to his feet, two half hitches taken around his neck and the bonds about his ankles slashed in two. Steve flung him up in the saddle.

"An' another one," he said coolly. "Restrain y'enthusiasm, gents. I beg you to remember as a official deputy sheriff I'm supposed to head this heah party."

One by one, grimly, desperately alert, he fastened ropes about his captives' necks, mounted them and spread them out in a line of mounted men, each man a little more than ten feet from the next man ahead of him and the same distance from the man behind.

"I'm takin' your guns along," he observed grimly. "Now listen! Lucy Harrison was carried off by Swain near a hour ago. I've got reason to believe she's safe till daylight, but it ain't good reason. I'm takin' you fellers to wheah you can be convinced I ain't lyin'. Then I'm goin' to give you guns. Meantime, any man tries to bust up this heah posse, I'll blow him to hell!"

He slung a sack over Duke's saddle and mounted. The sack was heavy and lumpy. It contained the guns he had taken from the men who now followed him, swearing. And Steve spurred into position, knotted an essential rope to his saddlehorn, and began assuredly the most peculiar parade of a deputy sheriff with his posse that ever wound across a cowman's range.

Steve was in the lead, smoking a cigaret whose glow now and then disclosed a curious bitter smile upon his lips. Ten feet behind him a man rode with his hands behind his back, a rope about his neck, and his holsters empty. Ten feet farther, there was a second man in similar case. Ten feet more, a third. The cavalcade was a long one. Steve had used up four lariats for his leading rope alone. He was taking a dozen men to be his posse. Their guns he carried in a sack. Every man hated him. And every man cursed him venomously as he rode.

And Steve, who saw no chance whatever of his living to see the sun rise again and who now was preparing with a curious bitter amusement merely to see that Lucy was safe before he was killed, Steve rode and smiled and drove his mind frantically from the thought of what might have happened in Hell Sink before he could get these men there.

Once inside he knew they would fight. They would fight the real rustlers as

savagely as they had tried to fight him. They might even accept his leadership during the fighting. After it was over they would probably kill him for the murders they thought he had committed. That didn't matter. What did matter was the fact that the necessity of taking Lucy's rescuers to the scene of her danger roped together cut down their speed. Swain had made better time than Steve had from Hell Sink to the Bar Circle, because more familiar with the ground. He would make better time back, because though one man will ordinarily travel faster than a dozen, a dozen tied together will relatively crawl.

Anything faster than the most deliberate of trots was dangerous. One horse making a misstep might stumble and throw his helpless rider. One rider, dismounted, might pull two others off, nearly or quite strangling all three of them. Any such mishap would mean a delay to all.

At a slow jog trot the strange cavalcade went on through the darkness. It went steadily across the level range, then the gently undulating ground that preceded the hills and then it vanished into a defile that led into their fastnesses. Here, Steve watched the way before him with the strained attention of a hawk. It was just barely possible that Swain, sweeping back to his stronghold after his successful raid, had left a man or so as rear guard to give warning by gunplay of any possible pursuit.

BUT NO one disclosed himself. Steve had left the Bar Circle with his helpless aides, nearly an hour after Swain's raid. He had lost more time in the necessarily slower journey of his troop. If Swain had left watchers behind him, they had become assured of the absence of pursuit and had gone on to their headquarters. There was no alarm as Steve's long string of helplessly cursing men wound their way through the hills; sometimes at a snail's pace where the going was bad and the slipping of a horse would be especially disastrous; sometimes at a fairly brisk rate.

They went past the spot where Hamby had been killed and Steve reined in.

"You fellers," he drawled evenly, prob'ly think I'm crazy or aimin' to murder the lot of you. But I'm tellin' you. 'Bout a mile farther on we come to Swain's lookouts—Block H men, ridin' night herd on Block H cows. If they give th' alarm, an' find out how I got you fellers tied up, theah ain't a chance in Gawd's world of me gettin' you loose an' givin' you guns in time to give you a chance o' fightin' clear. So—"

He rode along the line, inspecting the bonds on each man's wrists. As he found each secure, he slipped guns in their holsters.

"I don't give a damn what you think," he said grimly. "I'm goin' to take you in Hell Sink, turn you loose, an' I advise you to foller me. I'm goin' to be headin' for wheah Lucy is."

He returned to his place at the head of the line. But the profanity behind him died down peculiarly. His prisoners felt the comforting weight of guns on their hips. Their hands were still bound, true, but by sufficient twisting the guns might be got at.

The main reason for the sudden silence, however, was bewilderment. Steve had had them helpless. They were still very much handicapped in any sort of struggle. But he had re-armed them!

He led them grimly down the last narrow defile into the broad valley from which the entrance to Hell Sink led away. Cattle grazed all about them. Whitish blurs that were the faces of cud chewing cows moved vaguely to look at them and then, amid gruntings and bawlings, fled. Far away a thin tenor voice was warbling as a night herd rode his rounds according to local custom—a Block H man, with all the appearance of lawful occasion, guarding the entrance to the rustler's hangout.

A horse came thudding toward them. The singing stopped abruptly. A rider loomed up.

"Howdy! Who's theah?" His voice was harsh with suspicion.

Steve tilted back his hat.

"This heah," he drawled, "is th' Bar Circle on the warpath—"

Bang! Steve's hat jumped from his head and flipped backward. The other rider had whirled about and was streaking it away. Duke reared up, and crimson flames were pouring from Steve's guns as he fired after the fleeing figure.

"I reckon," said Steve grimly, lowering his weapons, "that's exhibit one. Now come on!"

He went on, dragging his train behind him. Profanity began to rise from the long string of men again. But this time it was a different sort of profanity, awestruck and astounded and suddenly raging.

Shrill whistles sounded. Many short blasts close together. They were answered and repeated hollowly from somewhere within the hills.

"Theah's warnin' we're comin', said Steve dryly. "You fellers beginnin' to be convinced now?"

He rode at the rocky wall. He checked and stared to right and left. There was no gap in the wall. None whatever. Yet this was where he had ridden in with Oliver.

There was a babbling in Spanish from some invisible person nearby. Then from nowhere a horse and rider were suddenly silhouetted against the light rock of the cliff.

"Miguel," drawled Steve grimly, "if you want to live—"

"*Dios mio!*" panted the newly appeared rider in the ultimate of panic. "Estebanito! *Por el amor de Dios!*"

"Wheah's th' openin'?" drawled Steve.

"Her-re?" Miguel's teeth were chattering. "I—I was runneeng away, Estebanito. I—I am not evil like these men. The—the Señor Swain, he has breeng the *señorita*—an' he swear—"

Miguel babbled in 'dobe Spanish, sweating, in a frenzy of terror.

A roar rose from the twelve men bound behind Steve. They spurred their horses recklessly forward, clamoring hoarsely to be freed.

"For Gawd's sake let us loose!" panted the tall man. "Let me kill Swain! For Gawd's sake, Steve!"

For answer, Steve slashed the rope that bound the man's wrists and thrust his knife into the suddenly freed hands. Steve's eyes were burning, like coals.

"You fellers," he drawled, "come on in as fast as you can. The law's on your side. I can't wait for you!"

Duke leaped forward. A canvas curtain, painted to match the rock on either side, gave way at the impact and fell in a tumbled mass of fabric. The opening that Steve had ridden through twice before was disclosed, and furnished both proof to Steve's followers of the existence of the almost mythical Hell Sink, and an explanation of how men had ridden past this place many times and had never suspected its existence.

Duke extricated his feet from the entangling mass of drapery and shot into the blank opening before him. He vanished. And then the freed Bar Circle men began to stream into the opening after him, guns out, spurring madly, sobbing with hatred and wild with the lust to kill.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLOCK H

THERE was activity in the open space when Steve went hurtling into it. There had been activity in the narrow way. Some one had essayed to bar all passage, and gunshots had echoed deafeningly, while lurid flashes split the abysmal blackness of the rock walled path. And at the end of the firing Steve had gone racing on, leaving two guards who would never try to bar the way again.

He came out into Hell Sink like a gunshot. Duke was going like a whirlwind, and Steve was in the act of reloading when he rode into view. There were fires burning, half a dozen of them, and by their light men were saddling hastily and some were still coming out of the shack that served as bunkhouse. The alarm had been sudden.

Swain forced his way clear of the press.

"Saddle up!" he was roaring. "The game's up, mos' likely, but we can bust through any posse they can gather an' fight clear to the Border. Saddle up! Take grub an' shells!"

Steve opened fire at the distant target of Swain and his men. It was too far for a six-gun to carry true, but a horse screamed and plunged.

A Bar Circle man came streaking out of the opening behind Steve. Another. Another. Puffs of smoke, curiously distinct in the bright firelight, shot from their guns. Flashes came from the rustlers. A horse went down and its rider rolled over, jumped up, and went forward on foot, still shooting. More Bar Circle men came raging in, every man at the utmost limit of his horse's speed. There seemed no end to them. Coming a few seconds apart, as they did, it seemed that there might be the whole range riding into the Sink with guns crackling to wipe out for good and all the rustling that had bled it white.

The heavier boom of rifles intermingled with the crackling guns. Another horse went down.

"Off your hawsses!" roared a voice. "Get to 'em on foot."

Most of the Bar Circle men obeyed. A running man on foot is not an easy target at any time. In a vast, sunken ampitheatre lighted only by flaring open blazes, he is incomparably more difficult to hit. In a wide, straggling skirmish line the Bar Circle men moved forward. As they came closer they used cover—the humps and hollows of the ground—to protect themselves from the bullets that now came whining wildly overhead.

But the Bar Circle men had one great advantage. They were the attackers and they had the power of the law behind them. The men of Hell Sink considered, inevitably, that since these men had found their way into the rustlers' retreat, all the range knew of it and knew how to enter it. Swain's followers thought instantly and desperately of flight and flight only. They had known, of course, that the rustling game could be carried on only so long. Once it was uncovered, flight was the only thing for any of them. They had been prepared for that flight, and now they were only anxious to begin it.

They fired wildly, saddling horses, even fighting for possession of those already saddled. The blazing fires had been lighted as a celebration, perhaps. Lucy's disappearance would make the taking over of the Bar Circle the easiest of coups. To loot that as the Block H had been looted, drain it of cattle and possibly dispose of the range itself afterward, would be comparatively simple. They had mentally disposed of Steve and Oliver. Oliver would not have the nerve to tell what he knew. He would come back. And Steve would be shot on sight by any man on the range without a chance to tell what he had learned.

It was a time for celebration. And then the Bar Circle riders came thundering in, shooting savagely and with a wild rage which seemed to the rustlers to indicate an overwhelming force behind them. There was no will to battle with them. There was only the belief that a foreseen need for flight had come about.

They were so much obsessed with that need, in fact, that they fought as much to delay the Bar Circle men's advance as to defeat them, and they remained by the horse corral where mounts were to be had for the saddling instead of scattering to cover.

BY THE corral, they were outlined by the flames. Bar Circle bullets began to find their marks. A horse, wounded by a stray bullet, went into a frenzy of bucking and kicking in the midst of the saddle animals and knocked over three men who were struggling to get mounts for themselves amid the tumult.

Echoed from one side of the Sink to the other, the explosions of the firearms were multiplied in number. It sounded as if a hundred men were fighting instead of thirteen against a maximum of twenty-five. The Bar Circle men advanced steadily, their guns pausing only to reload, and the savagery with which they

fought was ample substitute for their lack of numbers.

Three of the rustlers were down. A fourth, jumping into the saddle, caught a bullet in mid air and fell with a crash on the other side of his horse. The animals in the corral went into a frenzy of terror. Bullets flying about them, the hoarse screaming of one of their number that flung itself about on three legs, the shrill squealing of another with its hide nipped by a bit of flying lead . . .

Suddenly, somehow, nobody ever knew how, half the corral fence went down. Out of the opening streamed a horde of maddened horses, with two of the outlaws, mounted, swept along in their midst. Other men tried frantically to seize mounts from the racing mob.

A man went down under the pounding hoofs. The whole remuda went over him.

And then the whole Sink was full of flying animals, racing here and there and everywhere, stirring up the brand sore cattle within and communicating to them their own panic. And suddenly the sound of gunfire redoubled.

Half a dozen, no more, of the rustlers had managed to mount before the corral fence gave way. Two of them were shot down by the Bar Circle guns. Of the rest, one was ridden down by the fear maddened horses. Six more of the Hell Sink men were out of the fighting, from bullets or hoofs. But the rest, with their horses gone, turned to the most desperate sort of defense.

A Bar Circle man crumpled up, coughing. Another grinned with his cheek laid open by a bullet, and came on, shooting. A third was shooting with only one hand and reloading awkwardly when his gun went empty.

The firelight showed them, now. They were too close for the cover that had shielded them before to be effective. They were closing in together, and they were excellent targets. They were facing a knot of men slightly more than their own number and made as fierce by terror as they were made by rage. The booming of guns had become unutterably harsh and savage. It had risen to the rapidity and the rattling intensity of machine gun fire. The rustlers, in curiously strained, tense attitudes, etched out by the reddish light of the fires, were shooting like fiends. Licking tongues of flame darted from the muzzles of their weapons with incredible rapidity.

The Bar Circle men were coming on steadily, standing upright and firing with a peculiar deliberation that only the savagery of utter determination would have accounted for. One of them went down suddenly, his leg crumpled beneath him. He crawled forward grimly for a few paces. Then he rested the barrel of his pistol in his hand and began to shoot, with icy coolness, into the group of rustlers still on their feet.

There were not many of them left. A man sank down with an expression of intense astonishment on his face. Another, his hand and nerves shattered by the one shot, blubbered hysterically and tried to shoot with his left hand. The rest were bullet torn and desperate.

Steve had gone racing for the shack. He was holding his fire for the close quarters fighting he foresaw. He swept Duke aside into the shadow of the cliffs and shot forward in that obscurity. The firelight reached him, of course. It glistened on Duke's satin smooth hide, and its gleams picked out Steve's figure and even sparkled on the metalwork of the saddle and bridle and spurs.

But his first shots, though they had drawn attention to him, had not led to his being marked down for the target of many men. The Bar Circle men who followed him opened a heavy fire, and it was inevitable that the fire of the rustlers was drawn upon them in return. And Steve, in the relative shadow of the cliffs, plunged for the shack that abutted on the cliff wall itself.

He drew within range just as the heavier firing of the Bar Circle men began, as the rustlers began to return it. One man saw him riding in the shadows and fired viciously and continuously at

him, but the others gave their thoughts and their lead to the now mostly dismounted men from Lucy's ranch. So that Steve came closer to the big shack in Hell Sink than any of the others, and with fewer bullets fired at him.

He was hardly more than two hundred yards from the shack when the corral fence gave way and turned loose the horde of panic stricken animals. He was a hundred yards away when the rustlers, their horses mostly gone, huddled together at bay. And then as the sound of firing rose to its utmost intensity Steve pounded into full view and went racing by the flank of the rustlers with both guns spitting flame. Lead whined all about him and splashed spitefully on the rocky walls of the cliff in whose shadow he had ridden.

SWUNG almost out of sight on the farther side of Duke, he fired over his saddle. Crimson flashes were preludes to moaning missles that browned the clump of desperate ones. Suddenly Steve was past.

Duke plunged into shadow, close beside the huge shack which still showed lights within. Steve glanced through a window, swung one foot out of the stirrup and went crashing through sash and glass and all.

He landed on the floor in a heap. His guns went off as he struck the ground and then a bullet singed his jaw and a hilarious laugh sounded in the intervals of crackling firearms without.

Steve staggered up again. There were just two men inside the shack, both men hilariously, hideously drunk and irresponsible even with the gunfire going on outside. One man had his gun raised and was laughing a peculiar slack jawed laugh. As Steve reached his feet, he fired again, still laughing.

The other held Lucy Harrison. Her collar was torn from her throat. Her eyes were pools of agonized horror. Cord dangled from her wrists, as if the two drunken men were binding her fast against all possibility of further resistance.

"Kill'm," whooped the man with the gun. "Hol' the girl, Buck, an' I'll show her some fancy shootin'!"

Steve's guns clicked on empty cylinders. The man with the gun laughed, and he began to sight carefully.

With a leap, Steve smashed the lamp by a blow from one of his useless, empty guns. Blank darkness fell; but a few seconds later the light of the fires outside, shining through the windows, made the interior of the bunkhouse merely a place of deep and lurking shadows.

In those shadows Steve moved, catlike. The man with the gun swore angrily. He saw Steve. His gun came up.

Steve leaped before he could fire. A miss. A deadly game of hide and seek in the dimly lighted bunkhouse. Steve could not stop to reload. If he were still for an instant, the rustler, drunk as he was, would get home a shot. Twice he fired, and the bellow of the gun was deafening in the inclosed space. Once Steve escaped the bullet by flinging himself flat, as the drunken man whooped the instant before firing. Again he dived across the rough board table as the wavering, wabbling revolver muzzle picked him out of the darkness.

The man who held Lucy laughed uproariously. He was moved to wit upon his companion's poor marksmanship. Both were at that strange state of intoxication in which any difficult feat will be attempted with an air of preternatural gravity. The man with the gun scowled and swung his wavering weapon after Steve again.

At any other time, under any other circumstances, he would have been a pitiful antagonist for Steve. But now Steve was to all intents and purposes disarmed. The drunken rustler, again, if sober, would have killed Steve within seconds. But now his brain was slowed up. His muscles were sluggish and uncertain. In the loaded weapon he had enough of advantage to make Steve's death a certainty. In the unsteadiness of his hands was just enough of delay, of uncertainty, to make the killing a ghastly parody of a

cat and mouse tragedy, in which Steve, all alertness and wiry muscles and lightning quickness, would be killed by the lurching man with the gun.

He staggered forward, swearing thickly. The gun bellowed, and the bullet stung Steve's skin. He turned to make a wild leap for safety; he was cornered. The drunken man growled in tipsy satisfaction.

"Kill'm, Buck," said the other man owlishly, "an' come help get this gal tied up. She's a hellcat an' we got t' keep her."

The gun came into line, wavering a little but not enough to spoil the aim.

Steve flung one of his guns and followed it in a wildcat charge. The gun struck with a crack, a blow that would have knocked out any man with sensibilities undulled. This man reeled back, and Steve was on top of him. They hit the earth with a crash that sounded in the bunkhouse in spite of the savage roaring of guns outside. Then it was fighting, battling, rolling over and over, the other man roused to that maniacal fury that liquor will produce in some men.

"Hell!" said the man who held Lucy. "Y'ain't man 'nough to kill 'im! Thought better of yuh, Buck. But I'll help yuh. Never deshert a frien'—"

He drew his gun and stood by the inextricably tangled heap of arms and legs that was Steve, fighting for his own life and Lucy's, and the man who was now battling with a snarling, drunken ferocity.

"Let 'im get on top, Buck," said the man on his feet, owlishly. "I'll blow's head off. Let'm get on top. I'll kill'm for you."

He held the gun ready, gazing down with a tipsy earnestness at the pair who fought and gasped about his legs. Steve's face stared upward, contorted with the effort he was making to subdue the other. The gun went down, its muzzle inches only from Steve's temple.

With an incredible effort, he jerked himself under his opponent. The man who stood erect began to hunt absorbedly for his body, to put a bullet into that. It was clumsy. It was absurd. It was even ridiculous to see the air of more than solemn absorption with which, as a drunken man will, he set about this task. But it meant that Steve could be killed in seconds.

STEVE'S hand shot out suddenly. It clawed at the leg of the standing man. There was a wrench.

As that man toppled and fell with ludicrous efforts to maintain his balance, Steve managed to get the hold he wanted. It was about the rustler's throat. He suddenly heaped himself on top and began to pound the head he held against the floor, the legs of the rough board table, anything.

He stood up with a clubbed gun in his hand, just as the second man began to try to get to his feet again. Steve jumped him, striking ruthlessly with the gun.

And then he turned to Lucy. Her pallor was ghastly, but she tried gallantly to smile. And then she swayed toward him and began to sob racking sobs on his shoulder. Steve patted her back awkwardly.

"Theah, honey," he said clumsily, "y'all right now. Y'all right. That's th' Bar Circle boys outside, shootin' hell out o' Swain's gang!"

"But you!" gasped Lucy. "They—they'll shoot you too!"

Steve looked blank for an instant and then smiled dryly.

"Yeah," he conceded, "maybe they'll try t' shoot hell out o' me too presently. But I brought 'em heah tied in theah saddles, an' they're right much subdued wheah I'm concerned now."

The sound of shooting outside changed suddenly. From a sort of focus just outside the door, into which bullets from the Bar Circle guns crashed from time to time, it moved off at a rapid pace. Steve fumbled at the knots that bound Lucy's hands behind her back.

"They've broke," he said encouragingly. "Our fellers got 'em on th' run."

Her hands were free. He began to reload in haste. He took a chance and peered out of the window.

"Swain an' the rest are runnin'," he told her. "Bunched together an' shootin', but on th' run, an' our boys after 'em—those that are able to run."

He could see the Bar Circle men outlined in the light of the fires shifting their aim as if at a knot of desperately fleeing men.

"If they only think to hold the gap in the cliff," said Steve anxiously.

"Steve." Lucy was struggling for self control. "You—you're in danger."

Steve was staying close to Lucy. She still needed protection, perhaps, and some one had to be close by. But through the bullet smashed windows he could see the knot of fleeing rustlers plunge for the darkness. He saw a momentary confusion which he interpreted as their climbing of the fence that split the Sink into two parts. Some of the Bar Circle men were following them savagely, but the Bar Circle men had Lucy also to think of. Some of them were already coming in search of her.

"They're goin' to snag 'em some hawsses over theah," said Steve anxiously, "an' get away if we don't look out."

Bar Circle men approached the shack. Bullet torn and shaken by the fighting, they came warily but resolutely toward the doorway. They'd take care of Lucy.

Steve plunged for the window through which he had so unceremoniously entered. Duke was outside with a rifle roped to the saddle. Steve scrambled through and to him. The knots slipped from the rifle, an instant's quick inspection, and he swung into the saddle again.

"Dawggone 'em," he said grimly, "those Bar Circle boys ain't got any more sense'n jackrabbits. Up to the pass through the cliff, Duke."

Far away, amid the tumult made by the frightened animals all about, there was a sudden concerted drumming of hoofs. There is a distinct difference between the sound of a running horse with and without a rider. Somewhere, there were four or five horses being ridden, together.

Steve frowned and threw off the safety of the rifle. A fire flamed up suddenly and showed a horse lifting itself over the dividing fence in a magnificent leap. Another was following it closely.

Steve brought up the rifle.

"Fire, burn bright," he muttered grimly. "We're gettin' evidence an' cleanin' spots off our reputation at the same time."

The rifle cracked. A miss. A second horse leaped the fence. A third, a fourth, a fifth. Five riders, riding bareback on only bridled horses, were racing for the pass that would lead to the open range. They were bent low. They beat their mounts unmercifully to get extra speed. And they were out of range of accurate six-gun fire.

"These fellers, Duke," said Steve soberly, "they' killed Jud Williams an' that feller Hamby an' the sheriff an' probably a coupla Bar Circle fellers tonight. Hold still!"

The rifle cracked again. A man rolled off and his freed mount flung himself into a series of senseless bucks. The rifle went off once more—a spiteful, shattering detonation. A horse collapsed. Its rider went over its head and lay still.

"Like butchery," muttered Steve grimly, "but Gawd knows who they butchered."

TWO RIDERS remained, going like the wind for the gap in the rocky walls that encircled Hell Sink. And Steve fired and fired. One figure flung up his arms suddenly, rode like a sack of meal for a dozen yards, and slid heavily from his horse's back. The other thundered on and into the rocky way that shut him off from all gunfire.

And Steve had recognized him at the last instant of all.

"Swain! C'mon, Steve. Theah' just two more men we've got to find an' argue with. Swain an' Uncle Peter. Shake a hoof, hawss! Shake a hoof!"

Duke bounded ahead, despite long trail weariness. He had traveled many miles this day. Steve flung aside the rifle with the relief of one who discards an unfamiliar and undesired incumbrance,

sank down in the saddle and began to give Duke the help that only a born rider can give his horse. The big black animal went streaking across the Sink again, weary, but giving the best he had in him.

Horse and man went tearing into the narrow way. They clattered through the abysmal blackness, with hollow echoes all about them. They flung recklessly through the cleft in the everlasting hills. And they came out suddenly beneath a roof of stars, with disturbed and milling cattle staring at them uneasily—and the distant, thudding hoofbeats of a single horse racing at a panic stricken tempo in the exact direction of the Block H ranch.

"Let 'er go, Duke," drawled Steve. "Somebody's goin' to get killed now. Maybe Swain, maybe me, an' maybe Uncle Peter. But this heah black sheep aims to bleach his hide thorough while he's about it."

He settled down to the chase, through the wide cañon that led up to Big Valley itself. Echoes came faintly back from the hillsides on either hand. Out into the rolling country that was the precursor of the level range beyond Duke went gallantly, but he was very weary. Always, far ahead, just at the limit of audibility, there was that distant drumming of horse's hoofs that was Swain in flight.

"Got him some stuff cached, I reckon," muttered Steve. "Goin' to grab it an' slide for th' Border. Things've been movin' too fast for him tonight. Duke, I hate to ask it, but we got to move faster."

On and on. Once it seemed that the fleeing rider was lost in the darkness. Duke made a desperate effort and caught up to the sound again.

Once, too, it seemed to Steve that he heard a night herd singing off somewhere. A nasal, dismal melody concerned with the loves of wall eyed Bud of Timberline. That man would be riding a leisurely circle of a bunch of cows, not knowing that night herding, save at roundup time, would soon drop back to its normal unimportance through Steve's doing. His thoughts would be far from Swain and Steve Galt.

But it made Steve smile wryly in the darkness to realize that outside of the Bar Circle men who were still alive in Hell Sink, the whole range would aid Swain in lynching him if he were caught. And the men in Hell Sink, most likely, would protest only until Swain was included with Steve to be lynched.

Far to the east, a faint grayish tint appeared in the sky. Duke, running gallantly with sweat streaming from his body and a colossal weariness weighting down his hoofs, became faintly visible as an outline against the yet darker earth. Far, far away, a speck against the horizon was Swain. He dipped down a gentle incline and was lost to sight.

"He's got theah," said Steve grimly. "Home to the Block H. Now't depends on how many men're theah who gets killed."

His guns were loose in his holsters as Duke went heavily on, and when he reached the top of the slight slope that gave upon the ranch-house and saw the buildings faintly discernible in the increasing gray pallor of dawn, he drew his guns.

Then he rode down, guns out and leveled, watching for spurts of flame from windows or doors.

There was just one horse in sight, a roan mare, unsaddled, that stood with drooping head, and spur marks on her sides, close beside the ranch-house proper. The door of the ranch-house was open. No other sign of life, no other sound.

Steve dismounted warily. His eyes were narrowed to slits. His guns leveled, he went quietly up the steps, across the porch. There was a little rustling noise within, in the room that was always used as the ranch office. The bang of a drawer. Then a snarl of satisfaction in Swain's voice.

STEVE slipped inside. When Swain straightened up and started for the door he was looking into the muzzle of Steve's gun.

"Put 'em up," drawled Steve. "I got a

right good reason for wantin' you dead, Swain, but if y'act real obedient— Drop that stuff."

Staring, speechless, snarling, Swain dropped it to the floor. Wads and sheafs of bills—the proceeds of much unlawfulness, gathered in portable form for the getaway that now seemed denied to him.

"Right unkind of you," drawled Steve, "double crossin' Uncle Peter thataway. An' him a invalid. Y'ought to ha' thought of splittin' fifty-fifty with him anyways."

He advanced grimly and twitched Swain's guns from their holsters.

"I'm dawggoned disappointed," he observed coldly, "that I didn't have a good excuse to kill you. Outside the door. I reckon I'll ride y'back to Hell Sink. I ain't so dawggoned popular that I'm figurin' on carryin' you to jail. I wouldn't live to get you theah. But the Bar Circle boys'll 'tend t'you."

Swain moved toward the hall and outer door, his hands clenched. There was no sound, no movement anywhere. The house seemed dead, deserted. Steve holstered one of his guns. The money scattered on the floor bothered him. He stooped.

Swain whirled, a tiny gun from under his shirt out and bearing.

The explosion that shattered the silence was deafening in the small room. It echoed and rang for seconds in the empty hall outside. It stunned the eardrums for an instant. Steve's ears were still numbed by it when Swain choked queerly, flung out his arms and crashed to the floor.

" 'Didn't know he hadda shoulder gun," said Steve slowly, "or I'd ha' taken it away from him, an' he wouldn't ha' tried that, most likely. But—"

He blew the smoke thoughtfully from the barrel of his weapon. He looked about him tiredly.

"I reckon," he observed, "I'll go see Uncle Peter."

Suddenly, now, he heard the babbling of a voice. A door opened somewhere upstairs. A voice said mildly—

"Steve?"

Steve started. Then he said—

"It's me."

"Come on up, Steve. This heah damned Miguel, he needs to be kicked, an' I ain't got th' energy to do it. You 'tend to it for me."

Steve went up the steps two at a time. The open door, to which Miguel with handcuffs on his wrist clung weakly, opened upon the room which had always been occupied by his Uncle Peter. But the voice was another one entirely, one which Steve had not ever expected to hear again.

He went in the door, and Miguel cringed and smiled pallidly, and the sheriff eased himself back on the bed. A huge bandage disfigured his forehead.

"Creased me," he said mildly, "back in the jail. You put in a busy night, Steve. I remember startin' to tell you somethin' about warnin' Lucy, an' somethin' hit me, an' I come to with the jail right much of a wreck. When I wabbled out, they told me you'd played hell with the gang that wanted to lynch you, an' run off. Most everybody was chasin' you then, but I scared up four, five fellers an' come heah. Caught three Block H hands. When y'Uncle Peter wasn't on th' premises, they got scared an' talked right free. Y'Uncle Peter's dead, Steve."

"Yeah?" said Steve tiredly.

"Died 'bout a year ago," said the sheriff mildly. "He was right much of a invalid, an' Swain was runnin' everything, so Swain was doin' some rustlin' on his own. He must 'a' had th' ol' feller right much under his thumb. When he died, though, that looked right bad until he persuaded Oliver to help him cover it up. They kep' it quiet about th' old feller dyin' so they could keep runnin' the ranch. An' natural', they went in for rustlin' wholesale, then, to get all they could before th' game busted up on 'em."

Steve said nothing. But he was beginning to understand a great deal. This was what Oliver, in his desperation, had started to tell Dick Harrison. And Harrison had gone into a rage at the crookedness of the trick.

"I reckon," said the sheriff, "theah's goin' to be a kinda change of public opinion about you, Steve. You own the Block H now, y'know. An' as far as the killin' of Dick Harrison is concerned, I found your boots—"

Steve looked up, his eyes level.

"Dick Harrison," he said evenly, "was killed by Swain."

"But I foun'—" the sheriff began mildly.

"Oliver's dead," said Steve. "So's Swain. Dick Harrison was killed by Swain."

The sheriff frowned a little. He looked at Steve perplexedly. Then he shrugged.

"A'right, if you say so," he conceded. "I'll have to move those boots an'—uh—a coupla pieces o' other evidence. But we'll let it go at that. I caught Miguel las' night, tryin' to get somethin' out of th' office downstairs. I han'cuffed him to th' door an' told him t' wake me if anybody come, or I'd jail him. Th' boys I brought out heah went off t' town with th' Block H men we caught heah. They' comin' back with as many other men as they can raise. We were aimin' t' raid Hell Sink this mornin'."

"It's raided," said Steve.

HE SAT down and began to roll a cigaret thoughtfully. The sheriff eyed him peculiarly.

"Dawggone you, Steve," he said vexedly. "Y'know I'm bustin' with curiosity, an' heah y'got a ranch, an' folks're goin' to try to be extra decent to you to make up for what they thought about you, and—and hell! You sit theah lookin' gloomy!"

"Thinkin' about a lot o' things," said Steve rather wearily. "Oliver, for one. I reckon he'd ha' been a right good sort if things had been different."

"Y'uncle," said the sheriff, "was a funny cuss. He was durned cranky, an' he wa'n't a amiable character, anyways you looked at him. But I always felt—"

"Swain got him under his thumb," said Steve heavily. "He treated me right rough. Maybe he wouldn't ha' changed, but maybe he would. Findin' out he's dead an' Swain was rustlin' under cover of his name makes me feel sort o' different about him. It's kinda hard to hold a grudge against a dead man."

"But you," said the sheriff dryly, "you better be practisin' not holdin' grudges against livin' ones. Theah' goin' to be a lot of them goin' to be right sorry for the way they treated you, but they'll see you in hell before they'll tell you so."

"Yeah," Steve conceded. He nodded unsmilingly.

"They'll act different, though," the sheriff assured him. "Things are goin' to be different, now."

Steve rose rather heavily. He went to the window and looked out over the Block H range. Despoiled of its cattle, run down, its hands known rustlers who were either dead or bound for prison, it was not, perhaps, a luring prospect. But Steve did not think of that. He watched the sun, a vivid crimson ball, rolling up over the hills to the east.

"It's sunrise," said Steve quietly. "More ways than one. I got to get back to Lucy. Come on, Sheriff. We'll go."

The Camp-Fire

A free-to-all Meeting-Place *for Readers, Writers and Adventurers*

A Famous Battalion

ANSWERING the query of a reader, published two months ago, Lieutenant Dunn gives two sources of exhaustive information.

I note in issue of Nov. 1st an inquiry regarding the Princess Pat's.

There are two histories issued regarding this Battalion, one by R. Richards, of the Canadian War Records Department and another in two volumes by R. Holder Williams.

By the way, Major Hamilton Gault was *not* killed, as stated in reply. He lost an arm, leg or eye, I am not sure which. He was the organizer of the regiment and paid most of the equipment cost.

Reinforcements were largely furnished by companies organized by, and recruited from Canadian universities and colleges.—A. J. DUNN, Lieut., 24th Bty., Cowansville, Quebec.

Click and Buzz

THE FOLLOWING letter, sent in by a reader who is himself a telegrapher, spots an inaccuracy or two in T. T. Flynn's railway story, "Sam Sam."

In looking over your magazine for October 15th, 1927, noticed a few errors in the story, "Sam Sam," by T. T. Flynn. To the average reader they would be trifling, but to a railroad man, they stick out like sore thumbs. That is where Sam states that he learned "Morse" on his radio. While the code used in radio is correctly termed Continental Morse, but rarely called anything but the Continental Code by the uninitiated, differs but slightly from the original Morse, or land Morse, there being but eleven characters which differ from the land Morse, the real difference lies in the sound of the code. While the Land Morse characters are formed by a series of clicks, to put it roughly, a short click denoting a dot and when the sounder is held down for a longer period of time forming a sort of double dot, it forms a dash. In the radio work, the characters are formed by a prolonged buzz, or high pitched whine, a long buzz denoting a dash and a short one a dot. This does not seem like much of a difference on paper, but actually it takes a wireless operator nearly as long to get used to the different sound and code as it would if he were a raw beginner.

Then too, rule 493 says, "Operators must not permit any private line or instruments to be placed on the company's premises, or change any instruments, or wires, from their established location; all such changes must be made by the line repairer, etc. So you see, Sam could have been called on the carpet for that disobedience of the rules, and as he would have to appear before the superintendent, the super could, with sufficient cause, order his dismissal from the service. I know from personal experience, as have had an amateur transmitter and am working as "op" in just such a place as Flynn describes. Stories to the contrary, an operator's life isn't a bed of roses; it means working for at least five or six years before you are able to hold a trick in a town of any size.

Anyway it was a corking good story, full of action, and that's what we want in a story anyway, isn't it? I welcome this chance to butt into the Camp-Fire circle. Been on the outside, looking in ever since nineteen eighteen, but this is my first appearance in person. You'll have to excuse mistakes, as I'm writing this with one eye cocked for a main-liner that the "dspr" says should be showing up any time. Give Mr. Flynn best 73's for me, and tell him I enjoyed the story, anyway.—D. M. BENDER, Fairbanks, Minnesota.

And Mr. Flynn admits the corn—as do the editors of his story, who share the responsibility with him.

Adventure has sent me your letter about the yarn "Sam Sam." The point you picked about the difference in sound between Land Morse and Radio work is a darn' good one. I'll be frank to say I've never heard it passed on. Your experience as a radio man and a railroad telegrapher should qualify as for a good judge.

I railroaded for several years but never had occasion to learn telegraphy. I know Morse men and

Radio operators, and I've seen Radio men practising code on Morse sounders—buzzers also I'll admit—but the matter of the great difference the sound makes never came up for discussion.

Glad you liked the yarn anyway—and really glad to have heard from you. If I'm ever up that way I'll lean out the train window and yell: "Howdy, Camp-Fire!"—T. T. FLYNN, Washington, D. C.

A Word from Cape Colony

REGARDING an article by Kingsley Moses in *Adventure*, a South African reader arises with a word of doubt.

In your issue of December 23rd last (1926) you published an all too short essay on the Ascari of Abyssinia, by Kingsley Moses.

Long ago it was found by early explorers in West, East or Central Africa that there were faint traces of an ancient civilization amongst the tribes—not of art or literature but of military service. The word has been passed. Anyhow, the term Ascari is decidedly Latin.

I think Mr. Moses is mistaken in his idea that the Roman Legion sold their services to any nation which could pay for them. No Roman legion ever fought in a cause which was not Rome's; but they recruited, and maybe even conscripted legions in all the provinces of Rome, and, as far as possible, handed them into territorial legions.

Mr. Moses also implies that the Atlas Mountains are in North East Africa but as far as memory serves me they are in North West Africa—one of the pillars of Hercules in fact.

Does not Macaulay say:

"Where Atlas flings his shadows, far o'er the Western foam,
Shall be great fear on all that hear,
The mighty name of Rome?"

Your story "The Pennsylvania Line" is really very fine.—ALECK ROMAN MILLAR, P. O. Muizenberg, Cape Colony, S. Africa.

And Mr. Moses replies:

My dear Mr. Millar:

I hope you get this; as my peculiar atlas lists two Muizenbergs. Thanks for your letter to *Adventure*. An author always likes to hear from his readers.

I did not mean to convey the idea that Roman legionaries hired out to other nations—there was obviously little other employment from civilized nations. My intention was to indicate that the military profession of the Ascari was hereditary, as often the case in Rome.

The Atlas Mountains do begin in northwest Africa, but slant down all the way to the Fezzah well across the center of the continent. It was in that northeastern section that I knew the Ascari.

You ought to have some good material yourself. The story of Cape Colony is highly romantic.—KINGSLEY MOSES, East Hampton, N. Y.

That "Sinister Propaganda"

AWHILE back, because it had printed some war stories by Nason, Newson, Wheeler-Nicholson and others, *Adventure* was accused by a pacifist reader in Cleveland, of having "sold out to the Armament Trust." After reading my rather surprised reaction to that indictment, Mr. Christian sent along the following welcome letter of moral support.

Disparaging criticism from the envious invariably follows the achievement of literary work that an editor decides will win favor among the readers of his publication. Surely, experienced writers must be inured to disparagement, and accept it as an inevitable part of their day's work.

But misinterpreting an adventurous fable, laid in a purely fictitious war setting, for war propaganda, is so ridiculous as to be fit for publication under a caption of "jokes."

Not by the most exaggerated stretch of imagination can I detect anything redolent of war propaganda in *Adventure's* delightful fiction.

Between the covers of a magazine bearing the title *Adventure* one would naturally hope to find virile tales of valor; to thrill with great hazards and lusty conflicts; to exult in hard fought conquest—else why would one peruse the pages of such a magazine?

Through the many years in which I have enjoyed reading *Adventure* I have never ceased to marvel at the adroit manner in which this magazine caters to the many different tastes for adventurous fiction. If I encounter a type of story that pleases me not, *Adventure's* great variety affords me many more that are entirely satisfactory.

With all my heart I do deplore human nature's proclivity to war and discord. I even go so far as to ponder ways and means for world peace. But, certainly, I am not ashamed of the spirit that prevails upon me to get my *Adventure* from the newsstand twice a month—the spirit of adventure itself—the same spirit that urged, and stood our intrepid forefathers in good stead when they wrested these, our United States, from the Indians and made us this civilization of which we are so proud.—JOHN K. CHRISTIAN, Prescott, Arizona.

Along the Trail

IV

HATTIE LESTER wore overalls and managed her small plantation near Shawnee, years before the oil came. It was tough sledding, with lazy cotton

pickers, the boll weevil taking half or more of the crops, but she held on grimly. A hard woman in most ways, but square. Of her weaknesses we knew nothing; with her harsh, driving voice, her big fists, and her ability to make a dollar go further than even an eagle ought to fly, she seemed armor plated and proof against folly.

But the day came when black gold geysered from her brown, meager acres. The royalties were astounding. Harriet stood around on one foot and then the other, kind of awed and useless looking.

Finally she went up to Tulsa, and got herself a silk dress with stockings and shoes. A hat, too. And maybe that got her some excited, because first thing after she returned, there was a great big car standing out there in the gumbo.

Hattie rode in it four or five weeks, and seemed to like it. But she was getting really interested in oil, gasoline and such things. One day a shrewd auto salesman pointed out to her that her big $7500 sedan used up a gallon of gas every seven miles, and a gallon of oil every three or four hundred —while the little Blanklin went at least twenty-five to the gallon of gas! Why, in a year of running, the little car would save fully three hundred dollars in fuel!

The argument was too much for Hattie. She now has the economical Blanklin—and her $7500 sedan stands on jacks in her old cotton shed. . . . —Toi-Yabe Tolman.

Throwers and Woomeras

THAT two lands so far apart should produce weapons so much alike is just another tantalizing half-clue in the mystery of where we all came from. Or does it merely show that men, no matter how alien in blood or boundary line, will find the same solutions to the same phases of the old problem of how to get enough to eat and how to keep somebody from taking it away from you?

The article in *Adventure*, "Before the Bow and Arrow," interested me very much as the description of the spear thrower tallies exactly with the same weapon used at the present time by the Australian Aborigine. The thrower or woomera as it is called varies slightly in shape but in the main it tallies exactly with those described by Mr. Harrington. Some of these throwers are most elaborate affairs, decorated with carving and tracings of animals, etc., and considering the tools available are a credit to the makers. The Australian woomera is from fourteen inches to two feet long, one to four inches wide, and is concave to fit the lie of the spear, has a ball handle, and a propelling point lashed on the other end with a sinew and bat gum. They are shaved down to almost eggshell thickness for lightness.

The straight stick with ball handle, as described by Mr. Harrington, is also much used, and at a pinch I have seen a buck use a short straight branch with one of its twigs cut short for a propelling point. The piccaninnies will also fit themselves out with these branch woomeras to propel their willow and reed spears in their make believe fights and hunts. The adults' spears are from six to ten feet long and are mostly barbed, some with just a wooden or thorn barb fastened on with gummed sinew. Others, as with the Northern coast tribes, are barbed with thorns, teeth, glass or flints to a length of eighteen inches from the point. But in all cases the same means of giving strength and accuracy to the throw is used.

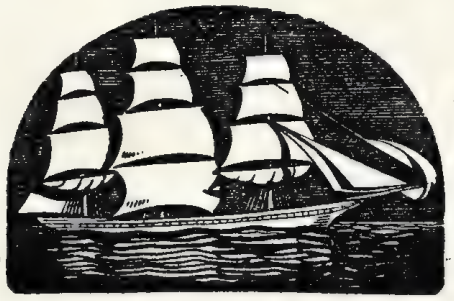
The Bow and Arrow hasn't reached the Australian Aborigine as yet. They have still that to learn or maybe they will skip that stage now.

In conclusion I must congratulate you on the splendid magazine you turn out. I have been taking it regularly for some time now and can truthfully assure you I enjoy every page of it. And after over forty years of a roving and fairly strenuous life I ought to be a fairly competent judge of adventure yarns. With best wishes for all success and a long, long trail ahead.—A. B. Robertson, Glen Devon by Dollar, Scotland.

Dam(e) Rumor

SEVERAL peculiar tales concerning *Adventure's* reversion to old policies, have floated in of late. Except that some of our tried and true friends in the far places of the world have been distressed or angered, there would be no reason to do more than smile at these queer distortions of the truth. But let me say once and for all that the magazine is *not* disowning its old comrades; rather is it attempting to weld them more and more closely in pleasant bonds which only death may break. And new members of the Camp-Fire fellowship may feel assured of a handclasp and the warmest of welcomes! —ANTHONY M. RUD

ASK *Adventure*



For *free information* and *services* you can't get elsewhere

Flying Cadets

REQUIREMENTS for this interesting branch of the Army.

Request:—"In 'Ask Adventure' some time ago, there was an account of a plan by which the Army mantained a training school for aeroplane pilots.

Can you tell me what education is necessary?

How long does this training require?

How would I have to go about getting an appointment?

What political influence would be necessary, if any?"—JOHN HIGGINS, Union City, N. J.

Reply, by Lieut. Glen R. Townsend:—You probably refer to the course in flying training which the Army gives to carefully selected young men who are appointed as Flying Cadets. The law provides that not to exceed 2,500 young men may be appointed to receive this training at one time and as the course takes about a year there are about that many appointments annually.

Appointments are all made on the basis of an examination. Only unmarried young men, citizens of the United States, between the ages of 20 and 27 years, are eligible for appointment. The requirements are two years of college work or its educational equivalent, excellent character, sound physique and excellent health. Political influence is unnecessary.

After appointment candidates are required to enlist for three years (but they are discharged either upon satisfactorily completing the course or if they fail to meet the requirements) and they receive pay at the rate of $75.00 per month in addition to food, clothing, quarters, etc. They may choose either the heavier than air or the lighter than air courses. They are first sent to a primary school and after completion of the work there, to the Advanced Flying School of the course chosen; for heavier than air at Kelly Field, Texas, and for lighter than air at Scott Field, near Belleville, Illinois.

If you wish to try for an appointment write at once to "The Adjutant General, Washington, D. C.," requesting the necessary blank forms upon which to file an application for appointment as Flying Cadet. When received fill them out carefully in accordance with the instructions and when completed return them to the same office. If your application is approved you will be authorized to take the examination either at Pittsburg, Pa., or at Washington, D. C.

To Settle an Argument

WHAT is a clipper?

Request:—"I would like to obtain a book describing how to splice (wire and rope), tie different knots, make rope mats and fenders, et cetera.

I would also like to get a book on the rigging of ships (I mean sailing ships) one that explains for example the difference between a brig and a barque.

Now a question to settle an argument. In speaking of a clipper ship, does 'clipper' refer to the hull or the rigging? I claim a clipper could be rigged say as either a barque or a barquentine but I may be wrong in saying barque in speaking of rigging."—RICHARD MILLER, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Reply, by Captain Dingle:—Any of the old seamanship manuals will give you the information you want about knots and sennitts. Get a copy of "Rudder," or write to the publishers for a list of their books on sailing ship seamanship. Such a work costs about $2.00, and will show you the different rigs also.

Clipper is a name describing a type of hull, and not a rig. A clipper may be a barque, ship, brig—any rig almost, but her hull must conform to the sharper lines developed in the tea and wool racing clippers. Many ships are now spoken of as clippers, which had no claim to the name: the *Benjamin Packard,* is a recent example. She was not a clipper.

Folks who only know the sailing ship through books are prone to call every square rigged ship a clipper. They are wrong.

Barque is proper, too, in speaking of that rig, regardless of modern American authorities. A bark is any craft that will float and carry people. A barque is a distinct rig. You are entirely right in that.

Alaska

THERE is still plenty of "back of beyond" here, and the vast territory has thus far apparently been only scratched by prospectors.

Request:—"1. What is the steamer fare from say Seattle to Nome? Are round trip rates any cheaper?

2. Assuming that one should go on a collecting trip for a college museum, particularly in quest of shore and water birds, where would one find good collecting grounds?

3. Is there good fishing in the streams, and what sort of fish may be taken?

4. Assuming that 3 men should make the trip, and should stay 4 months, during the summer, what would such a trip cost, exclusive of the collecting equipment, if they should go up the Yukon into the interior?

5. Would it be better to outfit in the States or do so after reaching Nome?

6. Is there any more 'back of beyond' somewhere off the beaten track where one may do some prospecting? What minerals are commonly found?

7. What would it cost to outfit, dogs and all, to travel in the winter and prospect in the summer and stay a year or two?

8. What is the *modus operandi* in finding and panning for gold, say?

9. How would one go about staking out and recording a claim?

10. Can one buy land cheaply there?"—STANLEY STOLBA, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Reply, by Mr. Theodore Seixas Solomons:—1. For steamer rates to Alaska apply by letter to Alaska Steamship Company, Seattle. Fare to Nome ranges around $75 first class and perhaps two-thirds second. I think round trip rates are a little cheaper.

2. For shore and water fowl collection the south and west coasts are favorable. That would require a private outfit, especially for the west coast which is practically devoid of settlements. You might, however, try first the vicinity of southern Alaska towns and then Nushagak, on the west coast, and work locally without a large boat.

3. There is good fishing in practically all Alaskan streams. Naturally, in the vicinity of the towns it is not so good.

4 and 5. Figure supplies at say 20 per cent. more than in the States, or a little less if brought up on a steamer, plus any outfit you had to buy. Your boat if one were brought or bought locally, would be your main extra expense (exclusive, as you say, of collecting equipment otherwise). A hundred dollars for the season per man ought to be your general supply cost—meaning food. If you have an objective like Nome (where shore birds are scarcer than farther south—not counting duck, geese, crane, etc., which I assume you are not after) you will do well to buy outside. But if you are going to do much moving around especially in long jumps, it will be better to buy locally. On the other hand, if you decide to travel by private sail or power boat of course you can take practically everything, and one purchase, in Seattle if possible, will be more economical.

6. There is still plenty of "back of beyond" in Alaska. Such a vast territory can not have been thoroughly prospected in the few decades whites have been in the country in numbers. Except where the few settlements are, there is, as a matter of fact, little prospecting going on, if numbers of prospectors is the criterion. One to every five hundred or a thousand square miles would be about it, except in the vicinity of the small mining settlements which, in central and northern Alaska particularly, are few and very far between. Gold is the main thing, still, but there are many other metals, copper, notably. There is also coal, likely to be of great value in the future.

7. For a year or two stay in Alaska, living the life of a prospector, allow, all told for everything, after landing there, five hundred dollars for the first year and about half that for the second. This presupposes, of course, paying little to the transportation companies, using a poling boat in summer and dogs in winter, and includes all such equipment, but does NOT include any luxuries or special expenses. You get your own meat and fish.

8 and 9. Looking for gold is a case of gold being "where you find it". But the gravels immediately overlaying bed rock, rim rock and the bed rock of side or old channels is the locale. If you find rock in place which seems to carry values, chip it off and have it assayed later. You can't do much in the way of quartz prospecting without some special tools and quite a bit of time. Testing gravels and sediments for placer means the use of the gold pan—shaking the stuff up with water and flowing off over the pan's edge the lighter materials. That's all there is to it. You mark out four corners of a twenty acre tract setting a notice in the center on a post, describing the boundaries and giving name, date, etc. Then you record a copy of this notice in the recording office of the district within a specified time—about sixty days, if I remember.

10. You can homestead land anywhere.

Daggers

THRUSTING weapons that come under this head. More on the bowie knife.

Ellsworth, Pa.

Request:—"I know what the blade of a genuine American bowie knife looks like, but what is the difference, if any, between: stilettos, dirks, poniards and daggers? Are any of them just thrusting weapons, or all cut and thrust?

Were, or are, the blades of bowie knives all the same, or did any of them have a blade similar to the standard service bayonet on the Springfield Rifle Model 1903?"—F. F. BLEICKER.

Reply, by Mr. Robert E. Gardner:—Stilettos, dirks, poniards and daggers are, generally speaking, all of the same classification, being essentially of the rigid, keen pointed thrusting type. All are two edged and very frequently ground to a cutting edge although they are not of a section form which lends itself to cutting. I will except the blades of triangular section from consideration. It might be more correct to state that stilettos, dirks and poniards are small daggers, usually worn with civil attire, the true dagger being the prototype of the three later forms.

The bowie knife, invented by Colonel James Bowie or his brother Rezin P., was ground from a long rasp or file and appears to have met with immediate favor on the part of the frontiersmen of his time. The original was copied in a great number of forms, which were alike in only one respect—they all had a thick back and a two edged point. Some are not unlike the service bayonet in form.

Refinishing Gunstocks

IT'S A slow and repetitious process, but the result is worth the trouble.

Request:—"Recently I purchased a Model 30 Remington rifle in the .30-06 caliber. It is my desire to give the stock of this rifle, which happens to be a fine piece of walnut, an oil finish. Somewhere I have a process for doing this, but at present can not lay my hands on it. If you will kindly tell me how to go about it I will be very glad to try it. Also whether or not it is advisable to dismount the stock before starting."—FRED L. EVERITT, Nevada City, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—To refinish the stock with the oil finish, first remove the stock from the barrel and action. Having done this, go over it with a steel wool or varnish remover, to remove all traces of the old finish, which I believe is a sort of oil one anyhow.

Having the entire surface of the wood rubbed down smoothly, wet the surface with a cloth saturated with warm water, which will cause the grain to raise, as we call it, and make the surface very rough. Rub this down with the steel wool again, and repeat the process until no further roughness results from the wetting. I have done this twelve times on my shotgun stock, but it was certainly a success. Then give it a final smoothing down.

Having done this, begin to rub into the wood, with the grain, boiled linseed oil, just enough to fill the wood, not enough to make it drippy or sticky. Experience will be a good guide in this work, I think. A good plan is to rub in one dose, and then wait a day or so, and follow it with another lot, well rubbed in. The more oil and rubbing, the better finish, you see.

Keep it up for about six coats, more or less, as you feel inclined. If well done a very little work each hunting season, with the oil, will keep your stock in shape indefinitely, and it will be well suited to rough use, as well, for oiled finish stands the wear of hunting better than any other, I truly believe.

Harvest Hands

CONCERNING the seasonal trek of migratory workers.

Request:—"The writer expects to rough it next summer as a harvest hand and would like to know when does the season begin and end in your territory. To whom should I apply; what is the pay per day? Can I follow it up to Canada?"—JAMES G. VLACOR, New York, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Joseph Mills Hanson:—The wheat harvesting season in South Dakota usually begins, depending somewhat upon the season, about the middle of July and finishes in North Dakota in the latter part of August. By starting in northern Texas, Oklahoma or Arkansas, however, early in June when the harvest is usually ripe in those States, you might follow the harvest northward through Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska, thus finding work for three months or better, especially if you were to go from North Dakota into Canada in early September.

Wages for harvest hands in Nebraska and the Dakotas average now about $4.00 per day without board and perhaps 75c less per day with board. Of course this varies considerably depending upon the size of the crop and the amount of labor available. I should say that with a good crop, wages would be apt to run a little more rather than less than the figures named.

On the other hand, last year, for instance, there was hardly any demand at all for harvest hands in the northern tier of States because the small grain crop was almost a total failure in Nebraska and the Dakotas, owing to drought, and there was little to harvest.

Before starting out to the harvest fields when the time comes, I would advise you to inform yourself from the papers as to the general condition of the wheat crop in the region where you are going, as the demand for labor will depend directly upon the quantity and excellence of the crop.

In applying for work of this sort I would advise you to communicate with the Commissioners of Agriculture at the capitals of the various States where you are going, who could give you general information as to the possibility of finding harvest work in their States.

The TRAIL AHEAD

The next issue of ADVENTURE

A Complete Novel

The King's Passport

By H. Bedford-Jones

Paris. The cold early darkness of November, 1640; new snow thinly crisp on the stones, the dark houses outlined with snow white roofs and gables, a bitter wind howling up the Seine. Three men—prince, noble, commoner—whose unguessed destiny was to bring them together within half an hour at the Pinecone Tavern. And each had slain his man that night.

A Novelette

Solo Smith, Outlaw

By J. Allan Dunn

Much was known in the Alarida Mountain country about the man, but this fact especially—that he faced his troubles *alone*. And now, having lost the Double S Ranch, when he faced the world without a cent, the sheriff rode up and insinuatingly told him that the stage had just been held up and the driver killed by a man who resembled him very much. Then *Smith* knew he must act solo in earnest.

Lead Lightning

By H. P. S. Greene

The dim shapes creeping up on the American war plane were the German Flying Circus in formation. *Dizzy* fired a short burst from each of his guns at the pursuing planes, then turned and whacked little *Tommy*, the pilot, on his helmet to warn him of the enemy. But *Tommy* merely shrugged in anger . . .

And—*Other Good Stories*

THE FLAME TEST, a story of the fire fighters, by KARL W. DETZER; PEARLS OF PALMAS, an exchange in West Coast coin, by EUGENE CUNNINGHAM; CHICKEN BILL, a hero of the Spanish War, by ROBERT V. CARR; THE PREVENTIVE EXECUTION, a lesson of the Vigilantes, by RAYMOND S. SPEARS; RED FOR ROGUES, a Western story of ingenuity, by ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON; ASHES, drama in the railroad yards, by T. T. FLYNN; Conclusion of THE SUN CHASERS, a novel of the Nebraska frontier, by HUGH PENDEXTER.

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A77—Gents heavy 18K White Gold ring. 2 blue-white Diamonds; 1 Blue Sapphire. $57.50.

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By the Beard of the Prophet

If you have been shaving for about ten years, you may recall my first prophecy that Mennen Shaving Cream would quickly bring about a revolution in shaving method.

Several million men prove every morning that I was right. The proud, rebellious wiriness of their whiskers is all gone. Dermutation strips 'em off so gently and smoothly that a man hardly knows his razor is in action.

Then, some years ago, I told you about Talcum for Men. At that time, men classed talcum with rouge and lip sticks. But to-day, the custom is almost universal to rub on a velvety, soothing film of Talcum for Men, which protects and doesn't show white on your face.

Last year, I pulled my third prophecy. I said that if you would try Mennen Skin Balm, you would find it the most delightful and efficient after-shaving preparation that ever touched your face. Incidentally, it's great for chapped lips or roughened skin—as wonderful for hands as for the face. Antiseptic and astringent. Right now, to-day, Skin Balm has won national acceptance and its sales are amazing.

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Jim Henry
(Mennen Salesman)

MY QUESTION CONTEST

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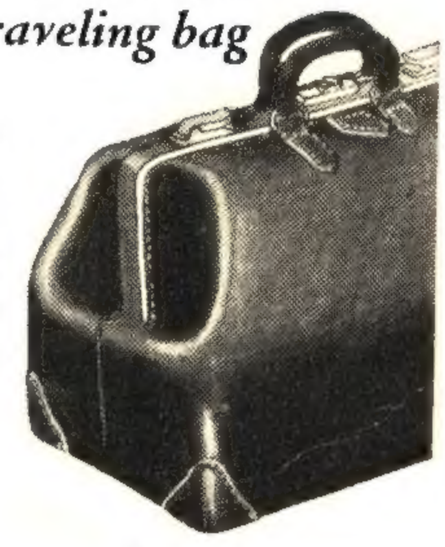

Send in an answer (100 words or less) to the question below. Best answer wins the bag. Contest closes April 10. I am the judge...Watch for the next contest in an early issue.

The QUESTION:

For what special reason do you use talcum after shaving?

Mail your reply to The Mennen Company, *Jim Henry Contest,* 377 Central Ave., Newark, N.J.

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